

THE SONG OF
HUGH GLASS
JOHN G. NEIHARDT



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Francis P. Higgins

THE SONG OF HUGH GLASS



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THE SONG OF HUGH GLASS

BY

JOHN G. NEIHARDT

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TO SIGURD, SCARCELY THREE

When you are old enough to know
The joys of kite and boat and bow
And other suchlike splendid things
That boyhood's rounded decade brings,
I shall not give you tropes and rhymes ;
But, rising to those rousing times,
I shall ply well the craft I know
Of shaping kite and boat and bow,
For you shall teach me once again
The goodly art of being ten.

Meanwhile, as on a rainy day
When 'tis not possible to play,
The while you do your best to grow
I ply the other craft I know
And strive to build for you the mood
Of daring and of fortitude
With fitted word and shapen phrase,
Against those later wonder-days
When first you glimpse the world of men
Beyond the bleaker side of ten.

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NOTE

THE following narrative is based upon an episode taken from that much neglected portion of our history, the era of the American Fur Trade. My interest in that period may be said to have begun at the age of six when, clinging to the forefinger of my father, I discovered the Missouri River from a bluff top at Kansas City. It was flood time, and the impression I received was deep and lasting. Even now I cannot think of that stream without a thrill of awe and something of the reverence one feels for mighty things. It was for me what the sea must have been to the Greek boys of antiquity. And as those ancient boys must have been eager to hear of perils nobly encountered on the deep and in the lands adjacent, so was I eager to learn of the heroes who had travelled my river as an imperial road. Nor was I disappointed in what I learned of them ; for they seemed to me in every way equal to the heroes of old. I came to think of them with a sense of personal ownership, for any one of many of them might have been my grandfather — and so a little of their purple fell on me. As I grew older and came to possess more of my inheritance, I began to see that what had enthralled me was, in fact, of the stuff of sagas,

a genuine epic cycle in the rough. Furthermore, I realized that this raw material had been undergoing a process of digestion in my consciousness, corresponding in a way to the process of infinite repetition and fond elaboration which, as certain scholars tell us, foreran the heroic narratives of old time.

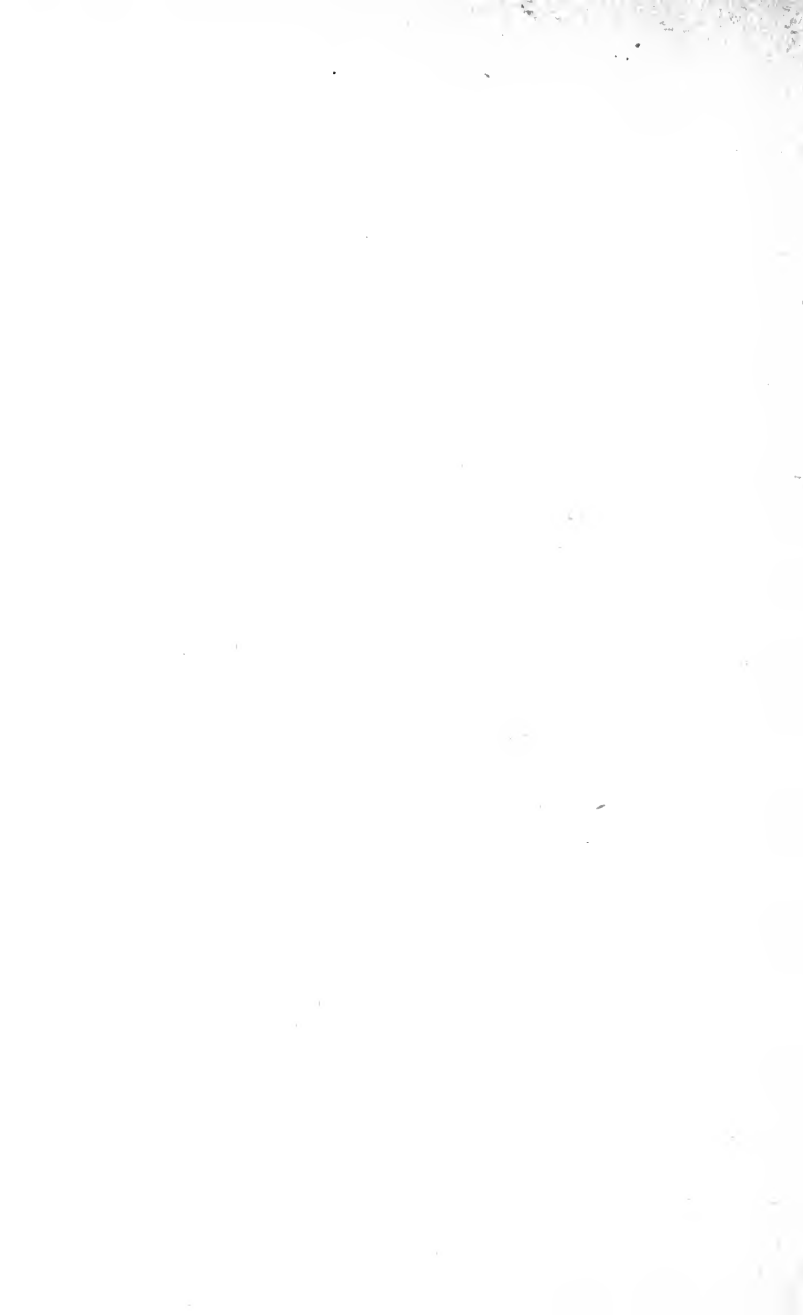
I decided that some day I would begin to tell these hero tales in verse; and in 1908, as a preparation for what I had in mind, I descended the Missouri in an open boat, and also ascended the Yellowstone for a considerable distance. On the upper river the country was practically unchanged; and for one familiar with what had taken place there, it was no difficult feat of the imagination to revive the details of that time—the men, the trails, the boats, the trading posts where veritable satraps once ruled under the sway of the American Fur Company.

The Hugh Glass episode is to be found in Chittenden's "History of the American Fur Trade" where it is quoted from its three printed sources: the *Missouri Intelligencer*, Sage's "Scenes in the Rocky Mountains," and Cooke's "Scenes in the United States Army." The present narrative begins after that military fiasco known as the Leavenworth Campaign against the Aricaras, which took place at the mouth of the Grand River in what is now South Dakota.

J. G. N.

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SONG OF HUGH GLASS

I

GRAYBEARD AND GOLDHAIR

The year was eighteen hundred twenty three.

'Twas when the guns that blustered at the Ree
Had ceased to brag, and ten score martial clowns
Turned from the unwhipped Aricara towns,
Earning the scornful laughter of the Sioux.
A withering blast the arid South still blew,
And creeks ran thin beneath the glaring sky;
For 'twas a month ere honking geese would fly
Southward before the Great White Hunter's face:
And many generations of their race,
As bow-flung arrows, now have fallen spent.

It happened then that Major Henry went
With eighty trappers up the dwindling Grand,
Bound through the weird, unfriending barren-land
For where the Big Horn meets the Yellowstone;
And old Hugh Glass went with them.

Large of bone,

Deep-chested, that his great heart might have
play,

Gray-bearded, gray of eye and crowned with gray
Was Glass. It seemed he never had been young;
And, for the grudging habit of his tongue,
None knew the place or season of his birth.
Slowly he 'woke to anger or to mirth;
Yet none laughed louder when the rare mood
fell,

And hate in him was like a still, white hell,
A thing of doom not lightly reconciled.
What memory he kept of wife or child
Was never told; for when his comrades sat
About the evening fire with pipe and chat,
Exchanging talk of home and gentler days,
Old Hugh stared long upon the pictured blaze,
And what he saw went upward in the smoke.

But once, as with an inner lightning stroke,
The veil was rent, and briefly men discerned
What pent-up fires of selfless passion burned
Beneath the still gray smoldering of him.
There was a rakehell lad, called Little Jim,
Jamie or Petit Jacques; for scarce began
The downy beard to mark him for a man.
Blue-eyed was he and femininely fair.
A maiden might have coveted his hair

That trapped the sunlight in its tangled skein :
So, tardily, outflowered the wild blond strain
That gutted Rome grown overfat in sloth.
A Ganymedes haunted by a Goth
Was Jamie. When the restive ghost was laid,
He seemed some fancy-ridden child who played
At manliness 'mid all those bearded men.
The sternest heart was drawn to Jamie then.
But his one mood ne'er linked two hours together.
To schedule Jamie's way, as prairie weather,
Was to get fact by wedding doubt and whim ;
For very lightly slept that ghost in him.
No cloudy brooding went before his wrath
That, like a thunder-squall, recked not its path,
But raged upon what happened in its way.
Some called him brave who saw him on that day
When Ashley stormed a bluff town of the Ree,
And all save beardless Jamie turned to flee
For shelter from that steep, lead-harrowed slope.
Yet, hardly courage, but blind rage agrope
Inspired the foolish deed.

'Twas then old Hugh
Tore off the gray mask, and the heart shone
through.
For, halting in a dry, flood-guttered draw,
The trappers rallied, looked aloft and saw

That travesty of war against the sky.
Out of a breathless hush, the old man's cry
Leaped shivering, an anguished cry and wild
As of some mother fearing for her child,
And up the steep he went with mighty bounds.
Long afterward the story went the rounds,
How old Glass fought that day. With gun for
club,
Grim as a grizzly fighting for a cub,
He laid about him, cleared the way, and so,
Supported by the firing from below,
Brought Jamie back. And when the deed was
done,
Taking the lad upon his knee: "My Son,
Brave men are not ashamed to fear," said Hugh,
"And I've a mind to make a man of you;
So here's your first acquaintance with the law!"
Whereat he spanked the lad with vigorous paw
And, having done so, limped away to bed;
For, wounded in the hip, the old man bled.

It was a month before he hobbled out,
And Jamie, like a fond son, hung about
The old man's tent and waited upon him.
And often would the deep gray eyes grow dim
With gazing on the boy; and there would go —
As though Spring-fire should waken out of snow —

A wistful light across that mask of gray.
And once Hugh smiled his enigmatic way,
While poring long on Jamie's face, and said :
"So with their sons are women brought to bed,
Sore wounded !"

Thus united were the two :
And some would dub the old man 'Mother Hugh' ;
While those in whom all living waters sank
To some dull inner pool that teemed and stank
With formless evil, into that morass
Gazed, and saw darkly there, as in a glass,
The foul shape of some weakly envied sin.
For each man builds a world and dwells therein.
Nor could these know what mocking ghost of
Spring
Stirred Hugh's gray world with dreams of blossom-
ing

That wooed no seed to swell or bird to sing.
So might a dawn-struck digit of the moon
Dream back the rain of some old lunar June
And ache through all its craters to be green.
Little they know what life's one love can mean,
Who shrine it in a bower of peace and bliss :
Pang dwelling in a puckered cicatrice
More truly figures this belated love.
Yet very precious was the hurt thereof,
Grievous to bear, too dear to cast away.

Now Jamie went with Hugh; but who shall say
If 'twas a warm heart or a wind of whim,
Love, or the rover's teasing itch in him,
Moved Jamie? Howsoe'er, 'twas good to see
Graybeard and Goldhair riding knee to knee,
One age in young adventure. They who saw
Likened unto a February thaw
Hugh's mellow mood those days; and truly so,
For when the tempering Southwest wakes to blow
A phantom April over melting snow,
Deep in the North some new white wrath is
 brewed.

Out of a dim-trailed inner solitude
The old man summoned many a stirring story,
Lived grimly once, but now shot through with
 glory
Caught from the wondering eyes of him who
 heard —

Tales jagged with the bleak unstudied word,
Stark saga-stuff. "A fellow that I knew,"
So nameless went the hero that was Hugh —
A mere pelt merchant, as it seemed to him;
Yet trailing epic thunders through the dim,
Whist world of Jamie's awe.

And so they went,
One heart, it seemed, and that heart well content
With tale and snatch of song and careless laughter.

Never before, and surely never after,
The gray old man seemed nearer to his youth —
That myth that somehow had to be the truth,
Yet could not be convincing any more.

Now when the days of travel numbered four
And nearer drew the barrens with their need,
On Glass, the hunter, fell the task to feed
Those four score hungers when the game should
fail.

For no young eye could trace so dim a trail,
Or line the rifle sights with speed so true.
Nor might the wistful Jamie go with Hugh;
“For,” so Hugh chaffed, “my trick of getting
game

Might teach young eyes to put old eyes to
shame.

An old dog never risks his only bone.”
‘Wolves prey in packs, the lion hunts alone’
Is somewhat nearer what he should have meant.

And so with merry jest the old man went;
And so they parted at an unseen gate
That even then some gust of moody fate
Clanged to betwixt them; each a tale to spell —
One in the nightmare scrawl of dreams from hell,
One in the blistering trail of days a-crawl,

Venomous footed. Nor might it ere befall
These two should meet in after days and be
Graybeard and Goldhair riding knee to knee,
Recounting with a bluff, heroic scorn
The haps of either tale.

'Twas early morn

When Hugh went forth, and all day Jamie rode
With Henry's men, while more and more the
 goad
Of eager youth sore fretted him, and made
The dusty progress of the cavalcade
The journey of a snail flock to the moon;
Until the shadow-weaving afternoon
Turned many fingers nightward — then he fled,
Pricking his horse, nor deigned to turn his head
At any dwindling voice of reprimand;
For somewhere in the breaks along the Grand
Surely Hugh waited with a goodly kill.
Hoofbeats of ghostly steeds on every hill,
Mysterious, muffled hoofs on every bluff!
Spurred echo horses clattering up the rough
Confluent draws! These flying Jamie heard.
The lagging air droned like the drowsy word
Of one who tells weird stories late at night.
Half headlong joy and half delicious fright,
His day-dream's pace outstripped the plunging
 steed's.

Lean galloper in a wind of splendid deeds,
Like Hugh's, he seemed unto himself, until,
Snorting, a-haunch above a breakneck hill,
The horse stopped short — then Jamie was aware
Of lonesome flatlands fading skyward there
Beneath him, and, zigzag on either hand,
A purple haze denoted how the Grand
Forked wide 'twixt sunset and the polar star.

A-tiptoe in the stirrups, gazing far,
He saw no Hugh nor any moving thing,
Save for a welter of cawing crows, a-wing
About some banquet in the further hush.
One faint star, set above the fading blush
Of sunset, saw the coming night, and grew.
With hand for trumpet, Jamie gave halloo;
And once again. For answer, the horse neighed.
Some vague mistrust now made him half afraid —
Some formless dread that stirred beneath the will
As far as sleep from waking.

Down the hill,
Close-footed in the skitter of the shale,
The spurred horse floundered to the solid vale
And galloped to the northwest, whinnying.
The outstripped air moaned like a wounded thing;
But Jamie gave the lie unto his dread.
“The old man's camping out to-night,” he said,

“Somewhere about the forks, as like as not;
And there'll be hunks of fresh meat steaming hot,
And fighting stories by a dying fire!”

The sunset reared a luminous phantom spire
That, crumbling, sifted ashes down the sky.

Now, pausing, Jamie sent a searching cry
Into the twilit river-skirting brush,
And in the vast denial of the hush
The champing of the snaffled horse seemed loud.

Then, startling as a voice beneath a shroud,
A muffled boom woke somewhere up the stream
And, like vague thunder hearkened in a dream,
Drawled back to silence. Now, with heart a-
bound,
Keen for the quarter of the perished sound,
The lad spurred gaily; for he doubted not
His cry had brought Hugh's answering rifle shot.
The laggard air was like a voice that sang,
And Jamie half believed he sniffed the tang
Of woodsmoke and the smell of flesh a-roast;
When presently before him, like a ghost,
Upstanding, huge in twilight, arms flung wide,
A gray form loomed. The wise horse reared and
shied,

Snorting his inborn terror of the bear!
And in the whirlwind of a moment there,
Betwixt the brute's hoarse challenge and the
charge,

The lad beheld, upon the grassy marge
Of a small spring that bullberries stooped to scan,
A ragged heap that should have been a man,
A huddled, broken thing — and it was Hugh!

There was no need for any closer view.
As, on the instant of a lightning flash
Ere yet the split gloom closes with a crash,
A landscape stares with every circumstance
Of rock and shrub — just so the fatal chance
Of Hugh's one shot, made futile with surprise,
Was clear to Jamie. Then before his eyes
The light whirled in a giddy dance of red;
And, doubting not the crumpled thing was dead
That was a friend, with but a skinning knife
He would have striven for the hated life
That triumphed there: but with a shriek of fright
The mad horse bolted through the falling night,
And Jamie, fumbling at his rifle boot,
Heard the brush crash behind him where the brute
Came headlong, close upon the straining flanks.
But when at length low-lying river banks —
White rubble in the gloaming — glimmered near,

A swift thought swept the mind of Jamie clear
Of anger and of anguish for the dead.
Scarce seemed the raging beast a thing to dread,
But some foul-playing braggart to outwit.
Now hurling all his strength upon the bit,
He sank the spurs, and with a groan of pain
The plunging horse, obedient to the rein,
Swerved sharply streamward. Sliddering in the
sand,
The bear shot past. And suddenly the Grand
Loomed up beneath and rose to meet the pair
That rode a moment upon empty air,
Then smote the water in a shower of spray.
And when again the slowly ebbing day
Came back to them, a-drip from nose to flank,
The steed was scrambling up the further bank,
And Jamie saw across the narrow stream,
Like some vague shape of fury in a dream,
The checked beast ramping at the water's rim.
Doubt struggled with a victor's thrill in him.
As, hand to buckle of the rifle-sheath,
He thought of dampened powder; but beneath
The rawhide flap the gun lay snug and dry.
Then as the horse wheeled and the mark went by—
A patch of shadow dancing upon gray —
He fired. A sluggish thunder trailed away;
The spreading smoke-rack lifted slow, and there,

Floundering in a seethe of foam, the bear
Hugged yielding water for the foe that slew!

Triumphant, Jamie wondered what old Hugh
Would think of such a "trick of getting game"!
"Young eyes" indeed! — And then that memory
came,

Like a dull blade thrust back into a wound.
One moment 'twas as though the lad had swooned
Into a dream-adventure, waking there
To sicken at the ghastly land, a-stare
Like some familiar face gone strange at last.
But as the hot tears came, the moment passed.
Song snatches, broken tales — a troop forlorn,
Like merry friends of eld come back to mourn —
O'erwhelmed him there. And when the black
bulk churned

The star-flecked stream no longer, Jamie turned,
Recrossed the river and rode back to Hugh.

A burning twist of valley grasses threw
Blar light about the region of the spring.
Then Jamie, torch aloft and shuddering,
Knelt there beside his friend, and moaned: "O
Hugh,

If I had been with you — just been with you!
We might be laughing now — and you are dead."

With gentle hand he turned the hoary head
That he might see the good gray face again.
The torch burned out, the dark swooped back, and
then

His grief was frozen with an icy plunge
In horror. 'Twas as though a bloody sponge
Had wiped the pictured features from a slate!
So, pillaged by an army drunk with hate,
Home stares upon the homing refugee.
A red gout clung where either brow should be;
The haughty nose lay crushed amid the beard,
Thick with slow ooze, whence like a devil leered
The battered mouth convulsed into a grin.

Nor did the darkness cover, for therein
Some torch, unsnuffed, with blear funereal flare,
Still painted upon black that alien stare
To make the lad more terribly alone.

Then in the gloom there rose a broken moan,
Quick stifled; and it seemed that something
stirred

About the body. Doubting that he heard,
The lad felt, with a panic catch of breath,
Pale vagrants from the legendry of death
Potential in the shadows there. But when
The motion and the moaning came again,

Hope, like a shower at daybreak, cleansed the
dark,
And in the lad's heart something like a lark
Sang morning. Bending low, he crooned:
"Hugh, Hugh,
It's Jamie — don't you know? — I'm here with
you."

As one who in a nightmare strives to tell —
Shouting across the gap of some dim hell —
What things assail him; so it seemed Hugh heard,
And flung some unintelligible word
Athwart the muffling distance of his swoon.

Now kindled by the yet unrisen moon,
The East went pale; and like a naked thing
A little wind ran vexed and shivering
Along the dusk, till Jamie shivered too
And worried lest 'twere bitter cold where Hugh
Hung clutching at the bleak, raw edge of life.
So Jamie rose, and with his hunting-knife
Split wood and built a fire. Nor did he fear
The staring face now, for he found it dear
With the warm presence of a friend returned.
The fire made cozy chatter as it burned,
And reared a tent of light in that lone place.
Then Jamie set about to bathe the face

With water from the spring, oft crooning low,
"It's Jamie here beside you — don't you know?"
Yet came no answer save the labored breath
Of one who wrestled mightily with Death
Where watched no referee to call the foul.

The moon now cleared the world's end, and the
 owl
Gave voice unto the wizardry of light;
While in some dim-lit chancel of the night,
Snouts to the goddess, wolfish corybants
Intoned their wild antiphonary chants —
The oldest, saddest worship in the world.

And Jamie watched until the firelight swirled
Softly about him. Sound and glimmer merged
To make an eerie void, through which he urged
With frantic spur some whirlwind of a steed
That made the way as glass beneath his speed,
Yet scarce kept pace with something dear that fled
On, ever on — just half a dream ahead:
Until it seemed, by some vague shape dismayed,
He cried aloud for Hugh, and the steed neighed —
A neigh that was a burst of light, not sound.
And Jamie, sprawling on the dewy ground,
Knew that his horse was sniffing at his hair,
While, mumbling through the early morning air,

There came a roll of many hoofs — and then
He saw the swinging troop of Henry's men
A-canter up the valley with the sun.

Of all Hugh's comrades crowding round, not one
But would have given heavy odds on Death;
For, though the graybeard fought with sobbing
breath,

No man, it seemed, might break upon the hip
So stern a wrestler with the strangling grip
That made the neck veins like a purple thong
Tangled with knots. Nor might Hugh tarry long
There where the trail forked outward far and
dim;

Or so it seemed. And when they lifted him,
His moan went treble like a song of pain,
He was so tortured. Surely it were vain
To hope he might endure the toilsome ride
Across the barrens. Better let him bide
There on the grassy couch beside the spring.
And, furthermore, it seemed a foolish thing
That eighty men should wait the issue there;
For dying is a game of solitaire
And all men play the losing hand alone.

But when at noon he had not ceased to moan,
And fought still like the strong man he had been,

There grew a vague mistrust that he might win,
And all this be a tale for wondering ears.
So Major Henry called for volunteers,
Two men among the eighty who would stay
To wait on Glass and keep the wolves away
Until he did whatever he should do.
All quite agreed 'twas bitter bread for Hugh,
Yet none, save Jamie, felt in duty bound
To run the risk — until the hat went round,
And pity wakened, at the silver's clink,
In Jules Le Bon.

‘He would not have them think
That mercenary motives prompted him.
But somehow just the grief of Little Jim
Was quite sufficient — not to mention Hugh.
He weighed the risk. As everybody knew,
The Rickarees were scattered to the West:
The late campaign had stirred a hornet's nest
To fill the land with stingers (which was so),
And yet —’

Three days a southwest wind may blow
False April with no drop of dew at heart.
So Jules ran on, while, ready for the start,
The pawing horses nickered and the men,
Impatient in their saddles, yawned. And then,
With brief advice, a round of bluff good-byes

And some few reassuring backward cries,
The troop rode up the valley with the day.

Intent upon his friend, with naught to say,
Sat Jamie; while Le Bon discussed at length
The reasonable limits of man's strength —
A self-conducted dialectic strife
That made absurd all argument for life
And granted but a fresh-dug hole for Hugh.
'Twas half like murder. Yet it seemed Jules knew
Unnumbered tales accordant with the case,
Each circumstantial as to time and place
And furnished with a death's head colophon.

Vivaciously despondent, Jules ran on.
'Did he not share his judgment with the rest?
You see, 'twas some contusion of the chest
That did the trick — heart, lungs and all that,
mixed
In such a way they never could be fixed.
A bear's hug — ugh!'

And often Jamie winced
At some knife-thrust of reason that convinced
Yet left him sick with unrelinquished hope.
As one who in a darkened room might grope
For some belovéd face, with shuddering
Anticipation of a clammy thing;

So in the lad's heart sorrow fumbled round
For some old joy to lean upon, and found
The stark, cold something Jamie knew was there.
Yet, womanlike, he stroked the hoary hair
Or bathed the face; while Jules found tales to
tell —

Lugubriously garrulous.

Night fell.

At sundown, day-long winds are like to veer;
So, summoning a mood of relished fear,
Le Bon remembered dire alarms by night —
The swoop of savage hordes, the desperate fight
Of men outnumbered: and, like him of old,
In all that made Jules shudder as he told,
His the great part — a man by field and flood
Fate-tossed. Upon the gloom he limned in blood
Their situation's possibilities:
Two men against the fury of the Rees —
A game in which two hundred men had failed!
He pointed out how little it availed
To run the risk for one as good as dead;
Yet, Jules Le Bon meant every word he said,
And had a scalp to lose, if need should be.

That night through Jamie's dreaming swarmed
the Ree.

Gray-souled, he wakened to a dawn of gray,

And felt that something strong had gone away,
Nor knew what thing. Some whisper of the will
Bade him rejoice that Hugh was living still;
But Hugh, the real, seemed somehow elsewhere.
Jules, snug and snoring in his blanket there,
Was half a life the nearer. Just so, pain
Is nearer than the peace we seek in vain,
And by its very sting compells belief.
Jules woke, and with a fine restraint of grief
Saw early dissolution. 'One more night,
And then the poor old man would lose the fight —
Ah, such a man!'

A day and night crept by,
And yet the stubborn fighter would not die,
But grappled with the angel. All the while,
With some conviction, but with more of guile,
Jules colonized the vacancy with Rees;
Till Jamie felt that looseness of the knees
That comes of oozing courage. Many men
May tower for a white-hot moment, when
The wild blood surges at a sudden shock;
But when, insistent as a ticking clock,
Blind peril haunts and whispers, fewer dare.
Dread hovered in the hushed and moony air
The long night through; nor might a fire be lit,
Lest some far-seeing foe take note of it.
And day-long Jamie scanned the blank sky rim

For hoof-flung dust clouds; till there woke in him
A childish anger — dumb for ruth and shame —
That Hugh so dallied.

But the fourth dawn came
And with it lulled the fight, as on a field
Where broken armies sleep but will not yield.
Or had one conquered? Was it Hugh or Death?
The old man breathed with faintly fluttering
breath,
Nor did his body shudder as before.
Jules triumphed sadly. 'It would soon be o'er;
So men grew quiet when they lost their grip
And did not care. At sundown he would slip
Into the deeper silence.'

Jamie wept,
Unwitting how a furtive gladness crept
Into his heart that gained a stronger beat.
So cities, long beleaguered, take defeat —
Unto themselves half traitors.

Jules began
To dig a hole that might conceal a man;
And, as his sheath knife broke the stubborn sod,
He spoke in kindly vein of Life and God
And Mutability and Rectitude.
The immemorial funerary mood
Brought tears, mute tribute to the mother-dust;
And Jamie, seeing, felt each cutting thrust
Less like a stab into the flesh of Hugh.

The sun crept up and down the arc of blue
And through the air a chill of evening ran;
But, though the grave yawned, waiting for the
 man,
The man seemed scarce yet ready for the grave.

Now prompted by a coward or a knave
That lurked in him, Le Bon began to hear
Faint sounds that to the lad's less cunning ear
Were silence; more like tremors of the ground
They were, Jules said, than any proper sound —
Thus one detected horsemen miles away.
For many moments big with fate, he lay,
Ear pressed to earth; then rose and shook his
 head

As one perplexed. "There's something wrong,"
 he said.

And — as at daybreak whiten winter skies,
Agape and staring with a wild surmise —
The lad's face whitened at the other's word.
Jules could not quite interpret what he heard;
A hundred horse might noise their whereabouts
In just that fashion; yet he had his doubts.
It could be bison moving, quite as well.
But if 'twere Rees — there'd be a tale to tell
That two men he might name should never hear.
He reckoned scalps that Fall were selling dear,

In keeping with the limited supply.
Men, fit to live, were not afraid to die!

Then, in that caution suits not courage ill,
Jules saddled up and cantered to the hill,
A white dam set against the twilight stream;
And as a horseman riding in a dream
The lad beheld him; watched him clamber up
To where the dusk, as from a brimming cup,
Ran over; saw him pause against the gloom,
Portentous, huge — a brooder upon doom.
What did he look upon?

Some moments passed;

Then suddenly it seemed as though a blast
Of wind, keen-cutting with the whips of sleet,
Smote horse and rider. Haunched on huddled feet,
The steed shrank from the ridge, then, rearing,
wheeled
And took the rubbly incline fury-heeled.

Those days and nights, like seasons creeping slow,
Had told on Jamie. Better blow on blow
Of evil hap, with doom seen clear ahead,
Than that monotonous, abrasive dread,
Blind gnawer at the soul-thews of the blind.
Thin-worn, the last heart-string that held him
kind;

Strung taut, the final tie that kept him true
Now snapped in Jamie, as he saw the two
So goaded by some terrifying sight.
Death riding with the vanguard of the Night,
Life dwindling yonder with the rear of Day!
What choice for one whom panic swept away
From moorings in the sanity of will?

Jules came and summed the vision of the hill
In one hoarse cry that left no word to say:
"Rees! Saddle up! We've got to get away!"

Small wit had Jamie left to ferret guile,
But fumblingly obeyed Le Bon; the while
Jules knelt beside the man who could not flee:
For big hearts lack not time for charity
However thick the blows of fate may fall.
Yet, in that Jules Le Bon was practical,
He could not quite ignore a hunting knife,
A flint, a gun, a blanket — gear of life
Scarce suited to the customs of the dead!

And Hugh slept soundly in his ample bed,
Star-canopied and blanketed with night,
Unwitting how Venality and Fright
Made hot the westward trail of Henry's men.

II

THE AWAKENING

No one may say what time elapsed, or when
The slumberous shadow lifted over Hugh :
But some globose immensity of blue
Enfolded him at last, within whose light
He seemed to float, as some faint swimmer might,
A deep beneath and overhead a deep.
So one late plunged into the lethal sleep,
A spirit diver fighting for his breath,
Swoops through the many-fathomed glooms of
 death,
Emerging in a daylight strange and new.

Rousing a languid wonder, came on Hugh
The quiet, steep-arched splendor of the day.
Agrope for some dim memory, he lay
Upon his back, and watched a lucent fleece
Fade in the blue profundity of peace
As did the memory he sought in vain.
Then with a stirring of mysterious pain,

Old habit of the body bade him rise;
But when he would obey, the hollow skies
Broke as a bubble punctured, and went out.

Again he woke, and with a drowsy doubt,
Remote unto his horizontal gaze
He saw the world's end kindle to a blaze
And up the smoky steep pale heralds run.
And when at length he knew it for the sun,
Dawn found the darkling reaches of his mind,
Where in the twilight he began to find
Strewn shards and torsos of familiar things.
As from the rubble in a place of kings
Men school the dream to build the past anew,
So out of dream and fragment builded Hugh,
And came upon the reason of his plight:
The bear's attack — the shot — and then the
 night
Wherein men talked as ghosts above a grave.

Some consciousness of will the memory gave:
He would get up. The painful effort spent
Made the wide heavens billow as a tent
Wind-struck, the shaken prairie sag and roll.
Some moments with an effort at control
He swayed, half raised upon his arms, until
The dizzy cosmos righted, and was still.

Then would he stand erect and be again
The man he was : an overwhelming pain
Smote him to earth, and one unruly limb
Refused the weight and crumpled under him.

Sickened with torture he lay huddled there,
Gazing about him with a great despair
Proportioned to the might that felt the chain.
Far-flung as dawn, collusive sky and plain
Stared bleak denial back.

Why strive at all ? —
That vacancy about him like a wall,
Yielding as light, a granite scarp to climb !
Some little waiting on the creep of time,
Abandonment to circumstance ; and then —

Here flashed a sudden thought of Henry's men
Into his mind and drove the gloom away.
They would be riding westward with the day !
How strange he had forgot ! That battered leg
Or some scalp wound, had set his wits a-beg !
Was this Hugh Glass to whimper like a squaw ?
Grimly amused, he raised his head and saw —
The empty distance : listened long and heard —
Naught but the twitter of a lonely bird
That emphasized the hush.

Was something wrong ?

'Twas not the Major's way to dally long,
And surely they had camped not far behind.
Now woke a query in his troubled mind —
Where was his horse? Again came creeping back
The circumstances of the bear's attack.
He had dismounted, thinking at the spring
To spend the night — and then the grisly thing —
Of course the horse had bolted; plain enough!
But why was all the soil about so rough
As though a herd of horses had been there?
The riddle vexed him till his vacant stare
Fell on a heap of earth beside a pit.
What did that mean? He wormed his way to it,
The newly wakened wonder dulling pain.
No paw of beast had scooped it — that was plain.
'Twas squared; indeed, 'twas like a grave, he
thought.

A grave — a grave — the mental echo wrought
Sick fancies! Who had risen from the dead?
Who, lying there, had heard above his head
The ghostly talkers deaf unto his shout?

Now searching all the region round about,
As though the answer were a lurking thing,
He saw along the margin of the spring
An ash-heap and the litter of a camp.
Suspicion, like a little smoky lamp

That daubs the murk but cannot fathom it,
Flung blear grotesques before his groping wit.
Had Rees been there? And he alive? Who
then?

And were he dead, it might be Henry's men!
How many suns had risen while he slept?
The smoky glow flared wildly, and he crept,
The dragged limb throbbing, till at length he
found

The trail of many horses westward bound;
And in one breath the groping light became
A gloom-devouring ecstasy of flame,
A dazing conflagration of belief!

Plunged deeper than the seats of hate and grief,
He gazed about for aught that might deny
Such baseness: saw the non-committal sky,
The prairie apathetic in a shroud,
The bland complacency of a vagrant cloud —
World-wide connivance! Smilingly the sun
Approved a land wherein such deeds were done;
And careless breezes, like a troop of youth,
Unawed before the presence of such truth,
Went scampering amid the tousled brush.
Then bye and bye came on him with a rush
His weakness and the consciousness of pain,
While, with the chill insistence of a rain

That pelts the sodden wreck of Summer's end,
His manifest betrayal by a friend
Beat in upon him. Jamie had been there;
And Jamie — Jamie — Jamie did not care!

What no man yet had witnessed, the wide sky
Looked down and saw; a light wind idling by
Heard what no ear of mortal yet had heard:
For he — whose name was like a magic word
To conjure the remote heroic mood
Of valiant deed and splendid fortitude,
Wherever two that shared a fire might be, —
Gave way to grief and wept unmanfully.
Yet not as they for whom tears fall like dew
To green a frosted heart again, wept Hugh.
So thewed to strive, so engined to prevail
And make harsh fate the zany of a tale,
His own might shook and tore him.

For a span

He lay, a gray old ruin of a man
With all his years upon him like a snow.
And then at length, as from the long ago,
Remote beyond the other side of wrong,
The old love came like some remembered song
Whereof the strain is sweet, the burden sad.
A retrospective vision of the lad
Grew up in him, as in a foggy night

The witchery of semilunar light
Mysteriously quickens all the air.
Some memory of wind-blown golden hair,
The boyish laugh, the merry eyes of blue,
Wrought marvelously in the heart of Hugh,
As under snow the dæmon of the Spring.
And momentarily it seemed a little thing
To suffer; nor might treachery recall
The miracle of being loved at all,
The privilege of loving to the end.
And thereupon a longing for his friend
Made life once more a struggle for a prize —
To look again upon the merry eyes,
To see again the wind-blown golden hair.
Aye, one should lavish very tender care
Upon the vessel of a hope so great,
Lest it be shattered, and the precious freight,
As water on the arid waste, poured out.
Yet, though he longed to live, a subtle doubt
Still turned on him the weapon of his pain:
Now, as before, collusive sky and plain
Outstared his purpose for a puny thing.

Praying to live, he crawled back to the spring,
With something in his heart like gratitude
That by good luck his gun might furnish food,
His blanket, shelter, and his flint, a fire.

For, after all, what thing do men desire
To be or have, but these condition it ?
These with a purpose and a little wit,
And howsoever smitten, one might rise,
Push back the curtain of the curving skies,
And come upon the living dream at last.

Exhausted, by the spring he lay and cast
Dull eyes about him. What did it portend ?
Naught but the footprints of a fickle friend,
A yawning grave and ashes met his eyes !
Scarce feeling yet the shock of a surprise,
He searched about him for his flint and knife ;
Knew vaguely that his seeking was for life,
And that the place was empty where he sought.
No food, no fire, no shelter ! Dully wrought
The bleak negation in him, slowly crept
To where, despite the pain, his love had kept
A shrine for Jamie undefiled of doubt.
Then suddenly conviction, like a shout,
Aroused him. Jamie — Jamie was a thief !
The very difficulty of belief
Was fuel for the simmering of rage,
That grew and grew, the more he strove to gage
The underlying motive of the deed.
Untempered youth might fail a friend in need ;
But here had wrought some devil of the will,

Some heartless thing, too cowardly to kill,
That left to Nature what it dared not do !

So bellowsed, all the kindled soul of Hugh
Became a still white hell of brooding ire,
And through his veins regenerating fire
Ran, driving out the lethargy of pain.
Now once again he scanned the yellow plain,
Conspirant with the overbending skies ;
And lo, the one was blue as Jamie's eyes,
The other of the color of his hair —
Twin hues of falseness merging to a stare,
As though such guilt, thus visibly immense,
Regarded its effect with insolence !

Alas for those who fondly place above
The act of loving, what they chance to love ;
Who prize the goal more dearly than the way !
For time shall plunder them, and change betray,
And life shall find them vulnerable still.

A bitter-sweet narcotic to the will,
Hugh's love increased the peril of his plight ;
But anger broke the slumber of his might,
Quickened the heart and warmed the blood that
 ran
Defiance for the treachery of Man,

Defiance for the meaning of his pain,
Defiance for the distance of the plain
That seemed to gloat, 'You can not master me.'
And for one burning moment he felt free
To rise and conquer in a wind of rage.
But as a tiger, conscious of the cage,
A-smoulder with a purpose, broods and waits,
So with the sullen patience that is hate's
Hugh taught his wrath to bide expedience.

Now cognizant of every quickened sense,
Thirst came upon him. Leaning to the spring,
He stared with fascination on a thing
That rose from giddy deeps to share the draught—
A face, it was, so tortured that it laughed,
A ghastly mask that Murder well might wear;
And while as one they drank together there,
It was as though the deed he meant to do
Took shape and came to kiss the lips of Hugh,
Lest that revenge might falter. Hunger woke;
And from the bush with leafage gray as smoke,
Wherein like flame the bullberries glinted red
(Scarce sweeter than the heart of him they fed),
Hugh feasted.

And the hours of waiting crept,
A-gloom, a-glow; and though he waked or slept,
The pondered purpose or a dream that wrought,

By night, the murder of his waking thought,
Sustained him till he felt his strength returned.
And then at length the longed-for morning burned
And beckoned down the vast way he should crawl —
That waste to be surmounted as a wall,
Sky-rims and yet more sky-rims steep to climb —
That simulacrum of enduring Time —
The hundred empty miles 'twixt him and where
The stark Missouri ran !

Yet why not dare ?

Despite the useless leg, he could not die
One hairsbreadth farther from the earth and sky,
Or more remote from kindness.

III

THE CRAWL

STRAIGHT away
Beneath the flare of dawn, the Ree land lay,
And through it ran the short trail to the goal.
Thereon a grim turnpikeman waited toll :
But 'twas so doomed that southering geese should
flee
Nine times, ere yet the vengeance of the Ree
Should make their foe the haunter of a tale.

Midway to safety on the northern trail
The scoriac region of a hell burned black
Forbade the crawler. And for all his lack,
Hugh had no heart to journey with the suns :
No suppliant unto those faithless ones
Should bid for pity at the Big Horn's mouth.

The greater odds for safety in the South
Allured him ; so he felt the midday sun
Blaze down the coulee of a little run

That dwindled upward to the watershed
Whereon the feeders of the Moreau head —
Scarce more than deep-carved runes of vernal
rain.

The trailing leg was like a galling chain,
And bound him to a doubt that would not pass.
Defiant clumps of thirst-embittered grass
That bit parched earth with bared and fang-like
roots;

Dwarf thickets, jealous for their stunted fruits,
Harsh-tempered by their disinheritance —
These symbolized the enmity of Chance
For him who, with his fate unreconciled,
Equipped for travel as a weanling child,
Essayed the journey of a mighty man.

Like agitated oil the heat-waves ran
And made the scabrous gulch appear to shake
As some reflected landscape in a lake
Where laggard breezes move. A taunting reek
Rose from the grudging seepage of the creek,
Whereof Hugh drank and drank, and still would
drink.

And where the mottled shadow dripped as ink
From scanty thickets on the yellow glare,
The crawler faltered with no heart to dare
Again the torture of that toil, until

The master-thought of vengeance 'woke the will
To goad him forth. And when the sun quiesced
Amid ironic heavens in the West —
The region of false friends — Hugh gained a rise
Whence to the fading cincture of the skies
A purpling panorama swept away.
Scarce farther than a shout might carry, lay
The place of his betrayal. He could see
The yellow blotch of earth where treachery
Had digged his grave. O futile wrath and toil!
Tucked in beneath yon coverlet of soil,
Turned back for him, how soundly had he slept!
Fool, fool! to struggle when he might have crept
So short a space, yet farther than the flight
Of swiftest dreaming through the longest night,
Into the quiet house of no false friend.

Alas for those who seek a journey's end —
They have it ever with them like a ghost:
Nor shall they find, who deem they seek it most,
But crave the end of human ends — as Hugh.

Now swoopingly the world of dream broke through
The figured wall of sense. It seemed he ran
As wind above the creeping ways of man,
And came upon the place of his desire,
Where burned, far-luring as a beacon-fire,

The face of Jamie. But the vengeful stroke
Bit air. The darkness lifted like a smoke —
And it was early morning.

Gazing far,

From where the West yet kept a pallid star
To thinner sky where dawn was wearing through,
Hugh shrank with dread, reluctant to renew
The war with that serene antagonist.
More fearsome than a smashing iron fist
Seemed that vast negativity of might;
Until the frustrate vision of the night
Came moonwise on the gloom of his despair.
And lo, the foe was naught but yielding air,
A vacancy to fill with his intent!
So from his spacious bed he 'rose and went
Three-footed; and the vision goaded him.

All morning southward to the bare sky rim
The rugged coulee zigzagged, mounting slow;
And ever as it 'rose, the lean creek's flow
Dwindled and dwindled steadily, until
At last a scooped-out basin would not fill;
And thenceforth 'twas a way of mocking dust.
But, in that Hugh still kept the driving lust
For vengeance, this new circumstance of fate
Served but to brew more venom for his hate,
And nerved him to avail the most with least.

Ere noon the crawler chanced upon a feast
Of bread-root sunning in a favored draw.
A sentry gopher from his stronghold saw
Some three-legged beast, bear-like, yet not a bear,
With quite misguided fury digging where
No hapless brother gopher might be found.
And while, with stripéd nose above his mound,
The sentinel chirped shrilly to his clan
Scare-tales of that anomaly, the man
Devoured the chance-flung manna of the plains
That some vague reminiscence of old rains
Kept succulent, despite the burning drouth.

So with new vigor Hugh assailed the South,
His pockets laden with the precious roots
Against that coming traverse, where no fruits
Of herb or vine or shrub might brave the land
Spread rooflike 'twixt the Moreau and the Grand.

The coulee deepened; yellow walls flung high,
Sheer to the ragged strip of blinding sky,
Dazzled and sweltered in the glare of day.
Capricious draughts that woke and died away
Into the heavy drowse, were breatht as flame.
And midway down the afternoon, Hugh came
Upon a little patch of spongy ground.
His thirst became a rage. He gazed around,

Seeking a spring; but all about was dry
As strewn bones bleaching to a desert sky;
Nor did a clawed hole, bought with needed
 strength,
Return a grateful ooze. And when at length
Hugh sucked the mud, he spat it in disgust.
It had the acrid tang of broken trust,
The sweetish, tepid taste of feigning love!

Still hopeful of a spring somewhere above,
He crawled the faster for his taunted thirst.
More damp spots, no less grudging than the first,
Occurred with growing frequency on the way,
Until amid the purple wane of day
The crawler came upon a little pool!
Clear as a friend's heart, 'twas, and seeming cool —
A crystal bowl whence skyey deeps looked up.
So might a god set down his drinking cup
Charged with a distillation of haut skies.
As famished horses, thrusting to the eyes
Parched muzzles, take a long-sought water-hole,
Hugh plunged his head into the brimming bowl
As though to share the joy with every sense.
And lo, the tang of that wide insolence
Of sky and plain was acrid in the draught!
How ripplingly the lying water laughed!
How like fine sentiment the mirrored sky

Won credence for a sink of alkali!
So with false friends. And yet, as may accrue
From specious love some profit of the true,
One gift of kindness had the tainted sink.
Stripped of his clothes, Hugh let his body drink
At every thirsting pore. Through trunk and
limb

The elemental blessing solaced him;
Nor did he rise till, vague with stellar light,
The lone gulch, buttressing an arch of night,
Was like a temple to the Holy Ghost.
As priests in slow procession with the Host,
A gusty breeze intoned — now low, now loud,
And now, as to the murmur of a crowd,
Yielding the dim-torched wonder of the nave.
Aloft along the dusky architrave
The wander-tale of drifting stars evolved;
And Hugh lay gazing till the whole resolved
Into a haze.

It seemed that Little Jim
Had come to share a merry fire with him,
And there had been no trouble 'twixt the two.
And Jamie listened eagerly while Hugh
Essayed a tangled tale of bears and men,
Bread-root and stars. But ever now and then
The shifting smoke-cloud dimmed the golden hair,
The leal blue eyes; until with sudden flare

The flame effaced them utterly — and lo,
The gulch bank-full with morning!

Loath to go,

Hugh lay beside the pool and pondered fate.
He saw his age-long pilgrimage of hate
Stretch out — a fool's trail; and it made him
 cringe;
For still amid the nightly vision's fringe
His dull wit strayed, companioned with regret.
But when the sun, a tilted cauldron set
Upon the gulch rim, poured a blaze of day,
He rose and bathed again, and went his way,
Sustaining wrath returning with the toil.

At noon the gulch walls, hewn in lighter soil,
Fell back; and coulees dense with shrub and vine
Climbed zigzag to the sharp horizon line,
Whence one might choose the pilotage of crows.
He labored upward through the noonday doze.
Of breathless shade, where plums were turning
 red

In tangled bowers, and grapevines overhead
Purpled with fruit to taunt the crawler's thirst.
With little effort Hugh attained the first;
The latter bargained sharply ere they sold
Their luscious clusters for the hoarded gold
Of strength that had so very much to buy.

Now, having feasted, it was sweet to lie
Beneath a sun-proof canopy; and sleep
Came swiftly.

Hugh awakened to some deep
Star-snuffing well of night. Awhile he lay
And wondered what had happened to the day
And where he was and what were best to do.
But when, fog-like, the drowse dispersed, he knew
How from the rim above the plain stretched far
To where the evening and the morning are,
And that 'twere better he should crawl by night,
Sleep out the glare. With groping hands for
sight,

Skyward along the broken steep he crawled,
And saw at length, immense and purple-walled —
Or sensed — the dusky mystery of plain.
Gazing aloft, he found the capsized Wain
In mid-plunge down the polar steep. Thereto
He set his back; and far ahead there grew,
As some pale blossom from a darkling root,
The star-blanchèd summit of a lonely butte,
And thitherward he dragged his heavy limb.

It seemed naught moved. Time hovered over
him,
An instant of incipient endeavor.
'Twas ever thus, and should be thus forever —

This groping for the same armful of space,
An insubstantial essence of one place,
Extentless on a weird frontier of sleep.
Sheer deep upon unfathomable deep
The flood of dusk bore down without a sound,
As ocean on the spirits of the drowned
Awakened headlong leagues beneath the light.

So lapsed the drowsy æon of the night —
A strangely tensile moment in a trance.
And then, as quickened to somnambulance,
The heavens, imperceptibly in motion,
Were altered as the upward deeps of ocean
Diluted with a seepage of the moon.
The butte-top, late a gossamer balloon
In mid-air tethered hovering, grew down
And rooted in a bleary expanse of brown,
That, lifting slowly with the ebb of night,
Took on the harsh solidity of light —
And day was on the prairie like a flame.

Scarce had he munched the hoarded roots, when
came

A vertigo of slumber. Snatchy dreams
Of sick pools, inaccessible cool streams,
Lured on through giddy vacancies of heat
In swooping flights; now hills of roasting meat

Made savory the oven of the world,
Yet kept remote peripheries and whirled
About a burning center that was Hugh.
Then all were gone, save one, and it turned blue
And was a heap of cool and luscious fruit,
Until at length he knew it for the butte
Now mantled with a weaving of the gloam.

It was the hour when cattle straggle home.
Across the clearing in a hush of sleep
They saunter, lowing; loiter belly-deep
Amid the lush grass by the meadow stream.
How like the sound of water in a dream
The intermittent tinkle of yon bell.
A windlass creaks contentment from a well,
And cool deeps gurgle as the bucket sinks.
Now blowing at the trough the plow-team drinks;
The shaken harness rattles. Sleepy quails
Call far. The warm milk hisses in the pails
There in the dusky barn-lot. Crickets cry.
The meadow twinkles with the glowing fly.
One hears the horses munching at their oats.
The green grows black. A veil of slumber floats
Across the haunts of home-enamored men.

Some freak of memory brought back again
The boyhood world of sight and scent and sound:
It perished, and the prairie ringed him round,

Blank as the face of fate. In listless mood
Hugh set his face against the solitude
And met the night. The new moon, low and
far,

A frail cup tilted, nor the high-swung star,
It seemed, might glint on any stream or spring
Or touch with silver any toothsome thing.
The kiote voiced the universal lack.
As from a nether fire, the plain gave back
The swelter of the noon-glare to the gloom.
In the hot hush Hugh heard his temples boom.
Thirst tortured. Motion was a languid pain.
Why seek some further nowhere on the plain?
Here might the kiotes feast as well as there.
So spoke some loose-lipped spirit of despair;
And still Hugh moved, volitionless — a weight
Submissive to that now unconscious hate,
As darkling water to the hidden moon.

Now when the night wore on in middle swoon,
The crawler, roused from stupor, was aware
Of some strange alteration in the air.
To breathe became an act of conscious will.
The starry waste was ominously still.
The far-off kiote's yelp came sharp and clear
As through a tunnel in the atmosphere —
A ponderable, resonating mass.

The limp leg dragging on the sun-dried grass
Produced a sound unnaturally loud.

Crouched, panting, Hugh looked up but saw no
cloud.

An oily film seemed spread upon the sky
Now dully staring as the open eye
Of one in fever. Gasping, choked with thirst,
A childish rage assailed Hugh, and he cursed :
'Twas like a broken spirit's outcry, tossed
Upon hell's burlesque sabbath for the lost,
And briefly space seemed crowded with the voice.

To wait and die, to move and die — what
choice ?

Hugh chose not, yet he crawled; though more
and more

He felt the futile strife was nearly o'er.
And as he went, a muffled rumbling grew,
More felt than heard; for long it puzzled Hugh.
Somehow 'twas coextensive with his thirst,
Yet boundless; swollen blood-veins ere they burst
Might give such warning, so he thought. And
still

The drone seemed heaping up a phonic hill
That towered in a listening profound.
Then suddenly a mountain peak of sound

Came toppling to a heaven-jolting fall !
The prairie shuddered, and a raucous drawl
Ran far and perished in the outer deep.

As one too roughly shaken out of sleep,
Hugh stared bewildered. Still the face of night
Remained the same, save where upon his right
The moon had vanished 'neath the prairie rim.
Then suddenly the meaning came to him.
He turned and saw athwart the northwest sky,
Like some black eyelid shutting on an eye,
A coming night to which the night was day!
Star-hungry, ranged in regular array,
The lifting mass assailed the Dragon's lair,
Submerged the region of the hounded Bear,
Out-topped the tall Ox-Driver and the Pole.
And all the while there came a low-toned roll,
Less sound in air than tremor in the earth,
From where, like flame upon a windy hearth,
Deep in the further murk sheet-lightning flared.
And still the southern arc of heaven stared,
A half-shut eye, near blind with fever rheum ;
And still the plain lay tranquil as a tomb
Wherein the dead reck not a menaced world.

What turmoil now? Lo, ragged columns hurled
Pell-mell up stellar slopes! Swift blue fires leap

Above the wild assailants of the steep!
Along the solid rear a dull boom runs!
So light horse squadrons charge beneath the guns.
Now once again the night is deathly still.
What ghastly peace upon the zenith hill,
No longer starry? Not a sound is heard.
So poised the hush, it seems a whispered word
Might loose all noises in an avalanche.
Only the black mass moves, and far glooms blanch
With fitful flashes. The capricious flare
Reveals the butte-top tall and lonely there
Like some gray prophet contemplating doom.

But hark! What spirits whisper in the gloom?
What sibilation of conspiracies
Ruffles the hush — or murmuring of trees,
Ghosts of the ancient forest — or old rain,
In some hallucination of the plain,
A frustrate phantom mourning? All around,
That e'er evolving, ne'er resolving sound
Gropes in the stifling hollow of the night.

Then — once — twice — thrice — a blade of
blinding light
Ripped up the heavens, and the deluge came —
A burst of wind and water, noise and flame
That hurled the watcher flat upon the ground.

A moment past Hugh famished; now, half
drowned,
He gasped for breath amid the hurtling drench.

So might a testy god, long sought to quench
A puny thirst, pour wassail, hurling after
The crashing bowl with wild sardonic laughter
To see man wrestle with his answered prayer!

Prone to the roaring flaw and ceaseless flare,
The man drank deeply with the drinking grass;
Until it seemed the storm would never pass
But ravin down the painted murk for aye.
When had what dreamer seen a glaring sky
And leagues of prairie pantingly aquiver?
Flame, flood, wind, noise and darkness were a
river
Tearing a cosmic channel to no sea.

The tortured night wore on; then suddenly
Peace fell. Remotely the retreating Wrath
Trailed dull, reluctant thunders in its path,
And up along a broken stair of cloud
The Dawn came creeping whitely. Like a
shroud
Gray vapors clung along the sodden plain.
Up rose the sun to wipe the final stain

Of fury from the sky and drink the mist.
Against a flawless arch of amethyst
The butte soared, like a soul serene and white
Because of the katharsis of the night.

All day Hugh fought with sleep and struggled on
Southeastward; for the heavy heat was gone
Despite the naked sun. The blank Northwest
Breathed coolly; and the crawler thought it best
To move while yet each little break and hollow
And shallow basin of the bison-wallow
Begrudged the earth and air its dwindling store.
But now that thirst was conquered, more and
more

He felt the gnaw of hunger like a rage.
And once, from dozing in a clump of sage,
A lone jackrabbit bounded. As a flame
Hope flared in Hugh, until the memory came
Of him who robbed a sleeping friend and fled.
Then hate and hunger merged; the man saw red,
And momentarily the hare and Little Jim
Were one blurred mark for murder unto him —
Elusive, taunting, sweet to clutch and tear.
The rabbit paused to scan the crippled bear
That ground its teeth as though it chewed a
root.

But when, in witless rage, Hugh drew his boot

And hurled it with a curse, the hare loped off,
Its critic ears turned back, as though to scoff
At silly brutes that threw their legs away.

Night like a shadow on enduring day
Swooped by. The dream of crawling and the
act

Were phases of one everlasting fact :
Hugh woke, and he was doing what he dreamed.
The butte, outstripped at eventide, now seemed
Intent to follow. Ever now and then
The crawler paused to calculate again
What dear-bought yawn of distance dwarfed the
hill.

Close in the rear it soared, a Titan still,
Whose hand-in-pocket saunter kept the pace.

Distinct along the southern rim of space
A low ridge lay, the crest of the divide.
What rest and plenty on the other side !
Through what lush valleys ran what crystal
brooks !

And there in virgin meadows wayside nooks
With leaf and purple cluster dulled the light !

All day it seemed that distant Pisgah Height
Retreated, and the tall butte dogged the rear.

At eve a striped gopher chirping near
Gave Hugh an inspiration. Now, at least,
No thieving friend should rob him of a feast.
His great idea stirred him as a shout.
Off came a boot, a sock was ravelled out.
The coarse yarn, fashioned to a running snare,
He placed about the gopher's hole with care,
And then withdrew to hold the yarn and wait.
The nightbound moments, ponderous with fate,
Crept slowly by. The battered gray face leered
In expectation. Down the grizzled beard
Ran slaver from anticipating jaws.
Evolving twilight hovered to a pause.
The light wind fell. Again and yet again
The man devoured his fancied prey: and then
Within the noose a timid snout was thrust.
His hand unsteadied with the hunger lust,
Hugh jerked the yarn. It broke.

Down swooped the night,
A shadow of despair. Bleak height on height,
It seemed, a sheer abyss enclosed him round.
Clutching a strand of yarn, he heard the sound
Of some infernal turmoil under him.
Grimly he strove to reach the ragged rim
That snared a star, until the skyey space
Was darkened with a roof of Jamie's face,

The deep-sunk, wiser self had known the rills
And nooks to be the facture of a whim ;
Yet had the pleasant lie befriended him,
And now the brutal fact had come to stare.

Succumbing to a langorous despair,
He mourned his fate with childish uncontrol
And nursed that deadly adder of the soul,
Self-pity. Let the crows swoop down and feed,
Aye, batten on a thing that died of need,
A poor old wretch betrayed of God and Man !
So peevishly his broken musing ran,
Till, glutted with the luxury of woe,
He turned to see the butte, that he might know
How little all his striving could avail
Against ill-luck. And lo, a finger-nail,
At arm-length held, could blot it out of space !
A goading purpose and a creeping pace
Had dwarfed the Titan in a haze of blue !
And suddenly new power came to Hugh
With gazing on his masterpiece of will.
So fare the wise on Pisgah.

Down the hill,
Unto the higher vision consecrate,
Now sallied forth the new triumvirate —
A Weariness, a Hunger and a Glory —

Against tyrannic Chance. As in a story
Some higher Hugh observed the baser part.
So sits the artist throned above his art,
Nor recks the travail so the end be fair.
It seemed the wrinkled hills pressed in to stare,
The arch of heaven was an eye a-gaze.
And as Hugh went, he fashioned many a phrase
For use when, by some friendly ember-light,
His tale of things endured should speed the night
And all this gloom grow golden in the sharing.
So wrought the old evangel of high daring,
The duty and the beauty of endeavor,
The privilege of going on forever,
A victor in the moment.

Ah, but when

The night slipped by and morning came again,
The sky and hill were only sky and hill
And crawling but an agony of will.
So once again the old triumvirate,
A buzzard Hunger and a viper Hate
Together with the baser part of Hugh,
Went visionless.

That day the wild geese flew,

Vague in a gray profundity of sky;
And on into the night their muffled cry
Haunted the moonlight like a far farewell.
It made Hugh homesick, though he could not tell

For what he yearned; and in his fitful sleeping
The cry became the sound of Jamie weeping,
Immeasurably distant.

Morning broke,
Blar, chilly, through a fog that drove as smoke
Before the booming Northwest. Sweet and sad
Came creeping back old visions of the lad —
Some trick of speech, some merry little lilt,
The brooding blue of eyes too clear for guilt,
The wind-blown golden hair. Hate slept that
day,

And half of Hugh was half a life away,
A wandering spirit wistful of the past;
And half went drifting with the autumn blast
That mourned among the melancholy hills;
For something of the lethargy that kills
Came creeping close upon the ebb of hate.
Only the raw wind, like the lash of Fate,
Could have availed to move him any more.
At last the buzzard beak no longer tore
His vitals, and he ceased to think of food.
The fighter slumbered, and a maudlin mood
Foretold the dissolution of the man.
He sobbed, and down his beard the big tears ran.
And now the scene is changed; the bleak wind's
cry

Becomes a flight of bullets snarling by

From where on yonder summit skulk the Rees.
Against the sky, in silhouette, he sees
The headstrong Jamie in the leaden rain.
And now serenely beautiful and slain
The dear lad lies within a gusty tent.

Thus vexed with doleful whims the crawler went
Adrift before the wind, nor saw the trail;
Till close on night he knew a rugged vale
Had closed about him; and a hush was there,
Though still a moaning in the upper air
Told how the gray-winged gale blew out the day.
Beneath a clump of brush he swooned away
Into an icy void; and waking numb,
It seemed the still white dawn of death had come
On this, some cradle-valley of the soul.
He saw a dim, enchanted hollow roll
Beneath him, and the brush thereof was fleece;
And, like the body of the perfect peace
That thrall'd the whole, abode the break of day.
It seemed no wind had ever come that way,
Nor sound dwelt there, nor echo found the place.
And Hugh lay lapped in wonderment a space,
Vexed with a snarl whereof the ends were lost,
Till, shivering, he wondered if a frost
Had fallen with the dying of the blast.
So, vaguely troubled, listlessly he cast

A gaze about him : lo, above his head
The gray-green curtain of his chilly bed
Was broidered thick with plums ! Or so it seemed,
For he was half persuaded that he dreamed ;
And with a steady stare he strove to keep
That treasure for the other side of sleep.

Returning hunger bade him rise ; in vain
He struggled with a fine-spun mesh of pain
That trammelled him, until a yellow stream
Of day flowed down the white vale of a dream
And left it disenchanted in the glare.
Then, warmed and soothed, Hugh rose and
 feasted there,
And thought once more of reaching the Moreau.

To southward with a painful pace and slow
He went stiff-jointed ; and a gnawing ache
In that hip-wound he had for Jamie's sake
Oft made him groan — nor wrought a tender
 mood :
The rankling weapon of ingratitude
Was turned again with every puckering twinge.

Far down the vale a narrow winding fringe
Of wilted green betokened how a spring
There sent a little rill meandering ;

And Hugh was greatly heartened, for he knew
What fruits and herbs might flourish in the
 slough,
And thirst, henceforth, should torture not again.

So day on day, despite the crawler's pain,
All in the windless, golden autumn weather,
These two, as comrades, struggled south to-
 gether —

The homeless graybeard and the homing rill:
And one was sullen with the lust to kill,
And one went crooning of the moon-wooded
 vast;

For each the many-fathomed peace at last,
But oh the boon of singing on the way!
So came these in the golden fall of day
Unto a sudden turn in the ravine,
Wherefrom Hugh saw a flat of cluttered green
Beneath the further bluffs of the Moreau.

With sinking heart he paused and gazed below
Upon the goal of so much toil and pain.
Yon green had seemed a paradise to gain
The while he thirsted where the lonely butte
Looked far and saw no toothsome herb or fruit
In all that yellow barren dim with heat.
But now the wasting body cried for meat,

And sickness was upon him. Game should pass,
Nor deign to fear the mighty hunter Glass,
But curiously sniffing, pause to stare.

Now while thus musing, Hugh became aware
Of some low murmur, phasic and profound,
Scarce risen o'er the border line of sound.
It might have been the coursing of his blood,
Or thunder heard remotely, or a flood
Flung down a wooded valley far away.
Yet that had been no weather-breeding day;
'Twould frost that night; amid the thirsty land
All streams ran thin; and when he pressed a
hand
On either ear, the world seemed very still.

The deep-worn channel of the little rill
Here fell away to eastward, rising, rough
With old rain-furrows, to a lofty bluff
That faced the river with a yellow wall.
Thereto, perplexed, Hugh set about to crawl,
Nor reached the summit till the sun was low.
Far-spread, shade-dimpled in the level glow,
The still land told not whence the murmur grew;
But where the green strip melted into blue
Far down the winding valley of the stream,
Hugh saw what seemed the tempest of a dream

At mimic havoc in the timber-glooms.
As from the sweeping of gigantic brooms,
A dust cloud deepened down the dwindling river;
Upon the distant tree-tops ran a shiver
And huddled thickets writhed as in a gale.

On creeps the windless tempest up the vale,
The while the murmur deepens to a roar,
As with the wider yawning of a door.
And now the agitated green gloom gapes
To belch a flood of countless dusky shapes
That mill and wrangle in a turbid flow —
Migrating myriads of the buffalo
Bound for the winter pastures of the Platte!

Exhausted, faint with need of meat, Hugh sat
And watched the mounting of the living flood.
Down came the night, and like a blot of blood
The lopped moon weltered in the dust-bleared
East.

Sleep came and gave a Barmecidal feast.
About a merry flame were simmering
Sweet haunches of the calving of the Spring,
And tender tongues that never tasted snow,
And marrow bones that yielded to a blow
Such treasure! Hugh awoke with gnashing teeth,
And heard the mooing drone of cows beneath,

The roll of hoofs, the challenge of the bull.
So sounds a freshet when the banks are full
And bursting brush-jams bellow to the croon
Of water through green leaves. The ragged
moon

Now drenched the valley in an eerie rain :
Below, the semblance of a hurricane ;
Above, the perfect calm of brooding frost,
Through which the wolves in doleful tenson
tossed

From hill to hill the ancient hunger-song.
In broken sleep Hugh rolled the chill night long,
Half conscious of the flowing flesh below.
And now he trailed a bison in the snow
That deepened till he could not lift his feet.
Again, he battled for a chunk of meat
With some gray beast that fought with icy
fang.

And when he woke, the wolves no longer sang ;
White dawn athwart a white world smote the
hill,
And thunder rolled along the valley still.

Morn, wiping up the frost as with a sponge,
Day on the steep and down the nightward plunge,
And Twilight saw the myriads moving on.
Dust to the westward where the van had gone,

And dust and muffled thunder in the east !
Hugh starved while gazing on a Titan feast.
The tons of beef, that eddied there and swirled,
Had stilled the crying hungers of the world,
Yet not one little morsel was for him.

The red sun, pausing on the dusty rim,
Induced a panic aspect of his plight :
The herd would pass and vanish in the night
And be another dream to cling and flout.
Now scanning all the summit round about,
Amid the rubble of the ancient drift
He saw a boulder. 'Twas too big to lift,
Yet he might roll it. Painfully and slow
He worked it to the edge, then let it go
And breathlessly expectant watched it fall.
It hurtled down the leaning yellow wall,
And bounding from a brushy ledge's brow,
It barely grazed the buttocks of a cow
And made a moment's eddy where it struck.

In peevish wrath Hugh cursed his evil luck,
And seizing rubble, gave his fury vent
By pelting bison till his strength was spent :
So might a child assail the crowding sea !
Then, sick at heart and musing bitterly,
He shambled down the steep way to the creek,
And having stayed the tearing buzzard beak

With breadroot and the waters of the rill,
Slept till the white of morning o'er the hill
Was like a whisper groping in a hush.
The stream's low trill seemed loud. The tumbled
brush

And rumpled tree-tops in the flat below,
Upon a fog that clung like spectral snow,
Lay motionless; nor any sound was there.
No frost had fallen, but the crystal air
Smacked of the autumn, and a heavy dew
Lay hoar upon the grass. There came on Hugh
A picture, vivid in the moment's thrill,
Of martialled corn-shocks marching up a hill
And spiked fields dotted with the pumpkin's
gold.

It vanished; and, a-shiver with the cold,
He brooded on the mockeries of Chance,
The shrewd malignity of Circumstance
That either gave too little or too much.

Yet, with the fragment of a hope for crutch,
His spirit rallied, and he rose to go,
Though each stiff joint resisted as a foe
And that old hip-wound battled with his will.
So down along the channel of the rill
Unto the vale below he fought his way.
The frore fog, rifting in the risen day,

Revealed the havoc of the living flood —
The river shallows beaten into mud,
The slender saplings shattered in the crush,
All lower leafage stripped, the tousled brush
Despoiled of fruitage, winter-thin, aghast.
And where the avalanche of hoofs had passed
It seemed nor herb nor grass had ever been.
And this the hard-won paradise, wherein
A food-devouring plethora of food
Had come to make a starving solitude!

Yet hope and courage mounted with the sun.
Surely, Hugh thought, some ill-begotten one
Of all that striving mass had lost the strife
And perished in the headlong stream of life —
A feast to fill the bellies of the strong,
That still the weak might perish. All day long
He struggled down the stricken vale, nor saw
What thing he sought. But when the twilight
awe

Was creeping in, beyond a bend arose
A din as though the kiotes and the crows
Fought there with shrill and raucous battle cries.

Small need had Hugh to ponder and surmise
What guerdon beak and fang contended for.
Within himself the oldest cause of war

Brought forth upon the instant fang and beak.
He too would fight! Nor had he far to seek
Amid the driftwood strewn about the sand
For weapons suited to a brawny hand
With such a purpose. Armed with club and
stone
He forged ahead into the battle zone,
And from a screening thicket spied his foes.

He saw a bison carcass black with crows,
And over it a welter of black wings,
And round about, a press of tawny rings
That, like a muddy current churned to foam
Upon a snag, flashed whitely in the gloam
With naked teeth; while close about the prize
Red beaks and muzzles bloody to the eyes
Betrayed how worth a struggle was the feast.

Then came on Hugh the fury of the beast —
To eat or to be eaten! Better so
To die contending with a living foe,
Than fight the yielding distance and the lack.
Masked by the brush he opened the attack,
And ever where a stone or club fell true,
About the stricken one an uproar grew
And brute tore brute, forgetful of the prey,
Until the whole pack tumbled in the fray

With bleeding flanks and lacerated throats.
Then, as the leader of a host who notes
The cannon-wrought confusion of the foe,
Hugh seized the moment for a daring blow.

The wolf's a coward, who, in goodly packs,
May counterfeit the courage that he lacks
And with a craven's fury crush the bold.
But when the disunited mass that rolled
In suicidal strife, became aware
How some great beast that shambled like a bear
Bore down with roaring challenge, fell a hush
Upon the pack, some slinking to the brush
With tails a-droop; while some that whined in pain
Writhed off on reddened trails. With bristled
mane

Before the flying stones a bolder few
Snarled menace at the foe as they withdrew
To fill the outer dusk with clamorings.
Aloft upon a moaning wind of wings
The crows with harsh, vituperative cries
Now saw a gray wolf of prodigious size
Devouring with the frenzy of the starved.
Thus fell to Hugh a bison killed and carved;
And so Fate's whims mysteriously trend —
Woe in the silken meshes of the friend,
Weal in the might and menace of the foe.

But with the fading of the afterglow
The routed wolves found courage to return :
Amid the brush Hugh saw their eye-balls burn ;
And well he knew how futile stick and stone
Should prove by night to keep them from their
own.

Better is less with safety, than enough
With ruin. He retreated to a bluff,
And scarce had reached it when the pack swooped
in
Upon the carcass.

All night long, the din
Of wrangling wolves assailed the starry air,
While high above them in a brushy lair
Hugh dreamed of gnawing at the bloody feast.

Along about the blanching of the east,
When sleep is weirdest and a moment's flight,
Remembered coextensive with the night,
May teem with hapful years ; as light in smoke,
Upon the jumble of Hugh's dreaming broke
A buzz of human voices. Once again
He rode the westward trail with Henry's men —
Hoof-smitten leagues consuming in a dust.
And now the nightmare of that broken trust
Was on him, and he lay beside the spring,
A corpse, yet heard the muffled parleying

Above him of the looters of the dead :
But when he might have riddled what they said,
The babble flattened to a blur of gray —
And lo, upon a bleak frontier of day,
The spent moon staring down ! A little space
Hugh scrutinized the featureless white face,
As though 'twould speak. But when again the
 sound

Grew up, and seemed to come from under ground,
He cast the drowse, and peering down the slope,
Beheld what set at grapple fear and hope —
Three Indian horsemen riding at a jog !
Their ponies, wading belly-deep in fog,
That clung along the valley, seemed to swim,
And through a thinner vapor moving dim,
The men were ghost-like.

 Could they be the Sioux ?

Almost the wish became belief in Hugh.
Or were they Rees ? As readily the doubt
Withheld him from the hazard of a shout.
And while he followed them with baffled gaze,
Grown large and vague, dissolving in the haze,
They vanished westward.

 Knowing well the wont
Of Indians moving on the bison-hunt,
Forthwith Hugh guessed the early riders were
The outflung feelers of a tribe a-stir

Like some huge cat gone mousing. So he lay
Concealed, impatient with the sleepy day
That dawdled in the dawning. Would it bring
Good luck or ill? His eager questioning,
As crawling fog, took on a golden hue
From sunrise. He was waiting for the Sioux,
Their parfleche panniers fat with sun-dried
maize

And wasna! From the mint of evil days
He would coin tales and be no begging guest
About the tribal feast-fires burning west,
But kinsman of the blood of daring men.
And when the crawler stood erect again —
O Friend-Betrayer at the Big Horn's mouth,
Beware of someone riding from the South
To do the deed that he had lived to do!

Now when the sun stood hour-high in the blue,
From where a cloud of startled blackbirds rose
Down stream, a panic tumult broke the doze
Of windless morning. What unwelcome news
Embroidered the parliament of feathered shrews?
A boiling cloud against the sun they lower,
Flackering strepent; now a sooty shower,
Big-flaked, squall-driven westward, down they
flutter
To set a clump of cottonwoods a-sputter

With cold black fire! And once again, some
shock

Of sight or sound flings panic in the flock —
Gray boughs exploding in a ruck of birds!

What augury in orniscopic words
Did yon swart sibyls on the morning scrawl?

Now broke abruptly through the clacking
brawl

A camp-dog's barking and a pony's neigh;
Whereat a running nicker fled away,
Attenuating to a rearward hush;
And lo! in hailing distance 'round the brush
That fringed a jutting bluff's base like a beard
Upon a stubborn chin out-thrust, appeared
A band of mounted warriors! In their van
Aloof and lonely rode a gnarled old man
Upon a piebald stallion. Stooped was he
Beneath his heavy years, yet haughtily
He wore them like the purple of a king.
Keen for a goal, as from the driving string
A barbed and feathered arrow truly sped,
His face was like a flinty arrow-head,
And brooded westward in a steady stare.
There was a sift of winter in his hair,
The bleakness of brown winter in his look.

Hugh saw, and huddled closer in his nook.
Fled the bright dreams of safety, feast and rest
Before that keen, cold brooder on the West,
As gaudy leaves before the blizzard flee.
'Twas Elk Tongue, fighting chieftain of the Ree,
With all his people at his pony's tail —
Full two-score lodges emptied on the trail
Of hunger!

On they came in ravelled rank,
And many a haggard eye and hollow flank
Made plain how close and pitilessly pressed
The enemy that drove them to the West —
Such foeman as no warrior ever slew.
A tale of cornfields plundered by the Sioux
Their sagging panniers told. Yet rich enough
They seemed to him who watched them from the
bluff;

Yea, pampered nigh the limit of desire!
No friend had filched from them the boon of
fire
And hurled them shivering back upon the beast.
Erect they went, full-armed to strive, at least;
And nightly in a cozy ember-glow
Hope fed them with a dream of buffalo
Soon to be overtaken. After that,
Home with their Pawnee cousins on the Platte,
Much meat and merry-making till the Spring.

On dragged the rabble like a fraying string
Too tautly drawn. The rich-in-ponies rode,
For much is light and little is a load
Among all heathen with no Christ to save!
Gray seekers for the yet begrudging grave,
Bent with the hoeing of forgotten maize,
Wood-hewers, water-bearers all their days,
Toiled 'neath the life-long hoarding of their packs.
And nursing squaws, their babies at their backs
Whining because the milk they got was thinned
In dugs of famine, strove as with a wind.
Invincibly equipped with their first bows
The striplings strutted, knowing, as youth knows,
How fair life is beyond the beckoning blue.
Cold-eyed the grandsires plodded, for they knew,
As frosted heads may know, how all trails merge
In what lone land. Raw maidens on the verge
Of some half-guessed-at mystery of life,
In wistful emulation of the wife
Stooped to the fancied burden of the race;
Nor read upon the withered granddam's face
The scrawled tale of that burden and its woe.
Slant to the sagging poles of the travaux,
Numb to the squaw's harsh railing and the goad,
The lean cayuses toiled. And children rode
A-top the household plunder, wonder-eyed
To see a world flow by on either side,

From blue air sprung to vanish in blue air,
A river of enchantments.

Here and there

The camp-curs loped upon a vexing quest
Where countless hoofs had left a palimpsest,
A taunting snarl of broken scents. And now
They sniff the clean bones of the bison cow,
Howl to the skies; and now with manes a-rough
They nose the man-smell leading to the bluff;
Pause puzzled at the base and sweep the height
With questioning yelps. Aloft, crouched low in
fright,

Already Hugh can hear the braves' guffaws
At their scorned foeman yielded to the squaws'
Inverted mercy and a slow-won grave.
Since Earth's first mother scolded from a cave
And that dear riddle of her love began,
No man has wrought a weapon against man
To match the deadly venom brewed above
The lean, blue, blinding heart-fires of her love.
Well might the hunted hunter shrink aghast!
But thrice three seasons yet should swell the past,
So was it writ, ere Fate's keen harriers
Should run Hugh Glass to earth.

The hungry curs

Took up again the tangled scent of food.
Still flowed the rabble through the solitude —

A thinning stream now of the halt, the weak
And all who had not very far to seek
For that weird pass whereto the fleet are slow,
And out of it keen winds and numbing blow,
Shrill with the fleeing voices of the dead.
Slowly the scattered stragglers, making head
Against their weariness as up a steep,
Fled westward; and the morning lay asleep
Upon the valley fallen wondrous still.

Hugh kept his nook, nor ventured forth, until
The high day toppled to the blue descent,
When thirst became a master, and he went
With painful scrambling down the broken scarp,
Lured by the stream, that like a smitten harp
Rippled a muted music to the sun.

Scarce had he crossed the open flat, and won
The half-way fringe of willows, when he saw,
Slow plodding up the trail, a tottering squaw
Whose years made big the little pack she bore.
Crouched in the brush Hugh watched her. More
and more

The little burden tempted him. Why not?
A thin cry throttled in that lonely spot
Could bring no succor. None should ever know,
Save him, the feasted kiote and the crow,

Why one poor crone found not the midnight fire.
Nor would the vanguard, quick with young desire,

Devouring distance westward like a flame,
Regret this ash dropped rearward.

On she came,
Slow-footed, staring blankly on the sand —
So close now that it needed but a hand
Out-thrust to overthrow her; aye, to win
That priceless spoil, a little tent of skin,
A flint and steel, a kettle and a knife!
What did the dying with the means of life,
That thus the fit-to-live should suffer lack?

Poised for the lunge, what whimsy held him
back?

Why did he gaze upon the passing prize,
Nor seize it? Did some gust of ghostly cries
Awaken round her — whisperings of Eld,
Wraith-voices of the babies she had held,
Guarding the milkless paps, the withered womb?
Far down a moment's cleavage in the gloom
Of backward years Hugh saw her now — nor saw
The little burden and the feeble squaw,
But someone sitting haloed like a saint
Beside a hearth long cold. The dream grew
faint;

And when he looked again, the crone was gone
Beyond a clump of willow.

Crawling on,
He reached the river. Leaning to a pool
Calm in its cup of sand, he saw — a fool!
A wild, wry mask of mirth, a-grin, yet grim,
Rose there to claim identity with him
And ridicule his folly. Pity? Faugh!
Who pitied this, that it should spare a squaw
Spent in the spawning of a scorpion brood?

He drank and hastened down the solitude,
Fleeing that thing which fleered him, and was
Hugh.

And as he went his self-accusing grew
And with it, anger; till it came to seem
That somehow some sly Jamie of a dream
Had plundered him again; and he was strong
With lust of vengeance and the sting of wrong,
So that he travelled faster than for days.

Now when the eve in many-shaded grays
Wove the day's shroud, and through the lower
lands

Lean fog-arms groped with chilling spirit hands,
Hugh paused perplexed. Elusive, haunting, dim,
As though some memory that stirred in him,

Invasive of the real, outgrew the dream,
There came upon the breeze that stole up stream
A whiff of woodsmoke.

'Twixt a beat and beat
Of Hugh's deluded heart, it seemed the sweet
Allure of home. — A brief way, and one came
Upon the clearing where the sumach flame
Ran round the forest-fringe; and just beyond
One saw the slough grass nodding in the pond
Unto the sleepy troll the bullfrogs sung.
And then one saw the place where one was
young —

The log-house sitting on a stumpy rise.
Hearth-lit within, its windows were as eyes
That love much and are faded with old tears.
It seemed regretful of a life's arrears,
Yet patient, with a self-denying poise,
Like some old mother for her bearded boys
Waiting sweet-hearted and a little sad. —
So briefly dreamed a recrudescent lad
Beneath gray hairs, and fled.

Through chill and damp
Still groped the odor, hinting at a camp,
A two-tongued herald wooing hope and fear.
Was hospitality or danger near?
A Sioux war-party hot upon the trail,
Or laggard Rees? Hugh crawled across the vale,

Toiled up along a zigzag gully's bed
And reached a bluff's top. In a smudge of red
The West burned low. Hill summits, yet alight,
And pools of gloom anticipating night
Mottled the landscape to the dull blue rim.
What freak of fancy had imposed on him?
Could one smell home-smoke fifty years away?
He saw no fire; no pluming spire of gray
Rose in the dimming air to woo or warn.

He lay upon the bare height, fagged, forlorn,
And old times came upon him with the creep
Of subtle drugs that put the will to sleep
And wreak doom to the soothing of a dream.
So listlessly he scanned the sombrous stream,
Scarce seeing what he scanned. The dark in-
creased;
A chill wind wakened from the frowning east
And soughed along the vale.

Then with a start
He saw what broke the torpor of his heart
And set the wild blood free. From where he lay
An easy point-blank rifle-shot away,
Appeared a mystic germinating spark
That in some secret garden of the dark
Upreared a frail, blue, nodding stem, whereon
A ruddy lily flourished — and was gone!

What miracle was this? Again it grew,
The scarlet blossom on the stem of blue,
And withered back again into the night.

With pounding heart Hugh crawled along the
height

And reached a point of vantage whence, below,
He saw capricious witch-lights dim and glow
Like far-spent embers quickened in a breeze.
'Twas surely not a camp of laggard Rees,
Nor yet of Siouan warriors hot in chase.
Dusk and a quiet bivouacked in that place.
A doddering vagrant with numb hands, the Wind
Fumbled the dying ashes there, and whined.
It was the day-old camp-ground of the foe!

Glad-hearted now, Hugh gained the vale below,
Keen to possess once more the ancient gift.
Nearing the glow, he saw vague shadows lift
Out of the painted gloom of smouldering logs —
Distorted bulks that bristled, and were dogs
Snarling at this invasion of their lair.
Hugh charged upon them, growling like a bear,
And sent them whining.

Now again to view
The burgeoning of scarlet, gold and blue,
The immemorial miracle of fire!
From heaped-up twigs a tenuous smoky spire

Arose, and made an altar of the place.
The spark-glow, faint upon the grizzled face,
Transformed the kneeling outcast to a priest;
And, native of the light-begetting East,
The Wind became a chanting acolyte.
These two, entempled in the vaulted night,
Breathed conjuries of interwoven breath.
Then, hark! — the snapping of the chains of
Death!

From dead wood, lo! — the epiphanic god!

Once more the freightage of the fennel rod
Dissolved the chilling pall of Jovian scorn.
The wonder of the resurrection morn,
The face apocalyptic and the sword,
The glory of the many-symboled Lord,
Hugh, lifting up his eyes about him, saw!
And something in him like a vernal thaw,
Voiced with the sound of many waters, ran
And quickened to the laughter of a man.

Light-heartedly he fed the singing flame
And took its blessing: till a soft sleep came
With dreaming that was like a pleasant tale.

The far white dawn was peering up the vale
When he awoke to indolent content.
A few shorn stars in pale astonishment

Were huddled westward ; and the fire was low.
Three scrawny camp-curs, mustered in a row
Beyond the heap of embers, heads askew,
Ears pricked to question what the man might do,
Sat wistfully regardant. He arose ;
And they, grown canny in a school of blows,
Skulked to a safer distance, there to raise
A dolorous chanting of the evil days,
Their gray breath like the body of a prayer.
Hugh nursed the sullen embers to a flare,
Then set about to view an empty camp
As once before ; but now no smoky lamp
Of blear suspicion searched a gloom of fraud
Wherein a smirking Friendship, like a bawd,
Embraced a coward Safety ; now no grief,
'Twixt hideous revelation and belief,
Made womanish the man ; but glad to strive,
With hope to nerve him and a will to drive,
He knew that he could finish in the race.
The staring impassivity of space
No longer mocked ; the dreadful skyward climb,
Where distance seemed identical with time,
Was past now ; and that mystic something, luck,
Without which worth may flounder in the ruck,
Had turned to him again.

So flamelike soared
Rekindled hope in him as he explored

Among the ash-heaps; and the lean dogs ran
And barked about him, for the love of man
Wistful, yet fearing. Surely he could find
Some trifle in the hurry left behind —
Or haply hidden in the trampled sand —
That to the cunning of a needy hand
Should prove the master-key of circumstance:
For 'tis the little gifts of grudging Chance,
Well husbanded, make victors.

Long he sought
Without avail; and, crawling back, he thought
Of how the dogs were growing less afraid,
And how one might be skinned without a blade.
A flake of flint might do it: he would try.
And then he saw — or did the servile eye
Trick out a mental image like the real?
He saw a glimmering of whetted steel
Beside a heap now washed with morning light!

Scarce more of marvel and the sense of might
Moved Arthur when he reached a hand to take
The fay-wrought brand emerging from the lake,
Whereby a kingdom should be lopped of strife,
Than Hugh now, pouncing on a trader's knife
Worn hollow in the use of bounteous days!

And now behold a rich man by the blaze
Of his own hearth — a lord of steel and fire!

Not having, but the measure of desire
Determines wealth. Who gaining more, seek
 most,
Are ever the pursuers of a ghost
And lend their fleetness to the fugitive.
For Hugh, long goaded by the wish to live,
What gage of mastery in fire and tool! —
That twain wherewith Time put the brute to
 school,
Evolving Man, the maker and the seer.

'Twixt urging hunger and restraining fear
The gaunt dogs hovered round the man; while
 he
Cajoled them in the language of the Ree
And simulated feeding them with sand,
Until the boldest dared to sniff his hand,
Bare-fanged and with conciliative whine.
Through bristled mane the quick blade bit the
 spine
Below the skull; and as a flame-struck thing
The body humped and shuddered, withering;
The lank limbs huddled, wilted.
 Now to skin
The carcass, dig a hole, arrange therein
And fix the pelt with stakes, the flesh-side up.
This done, he shaped the bladder to a cup

On willow withes, and filled the rawhide pot
With water from the river — made it hot
With roasted stones, and set the meat a-boil.
Those days of famine and prodigious toil
Had wrought bulimic cravings in the man,
And scarce the cooking of the flesh outran
The eating of it. As a fed flame towers
According to the fuel it devours,
His hunger with indulgence grew, nor ceased
Until the kettle, empty of the feast,
Went dim, the sky and valley, merging, swirled
In subtle smoke that smothered out the world.
Hugh slept.

And then — as divers, mounting, sunder
A murmuring murk to blink in sudden wonder
Upon a dazzling upper deep of blue —
He rose again to consciousness, and knew
The low sun beating slantly on his face.

Now indolently gazing round the place,
He noted how the curs had revelled there —
The bones and entrails gone; some scattered
hair

Alone remaining of the pot of hide.
How strange he had not heard them at his side!
And granting but one afternoon had passed,
What could have made the fire burn out so fast?

Had daylight waned, night fallen, morning crept,
Noon blazed, a new day dwindled while he
slept?

And was the friendlike fire a Jamie too?
Across the twilit consciousness of Hugh
The old obsession like a wounded bird
Fluttered.

He got upon his knees and stirred
The feathery ash; but not a spark was there.
Already with the failing sun the air
Went keen, betokening a frosty night.
Hugh winced with something like the clutch of
fright.

How could he bear the torture, how sustain
The sting of that antiquity of pain
Rolled back upon him — face again the foe,
That yielding victor, fleet in being slow,
That huge, impersonal malevolence?

So readily the tentacles of sense
Root in the larger standard of desire,
That Hugh fell farther in the loss of fire
Than in the finding of it he arose.
And suddenly the place grew strange, as grows
A friend's house, when the friend is on his bier,
And all that was familiar there and dear
Puts on a blank, inhospitable look.

Hugh set his face against the east, and took
That dreariest of ways, the trail of flight.
He would outcrawl the shadow of the night
And have the day to blanket him in sleep.
But as he went to meet the gloom a-creep,
Bemused with life's irrational rebuffs,
A yelping of the dogs among the bluffs
Rose, hunger-whetted, stabbing; rent the pall
Of evening silence; blunted to a drawl
Amid the arid waterways, and died.
And as the echo to the sound replied,
So in the troubled mind of Hugh was wrought
A reminiscent cry of thought to thought
That, groping, found an unlocked door to life:
The dogs — keen flint to skin one — then the knife
Discovered. Why, that made a flint and steel!
No further with the subtle foe at heel
He fled; for all about him in the rock,
To waken when the needy hand might knock,
A savior slept! He found a flake of flint,
Scraped from his shirt a little wad of lint,
Spilled on it from the smitten stone a shower
Of ruddy seed; and saw the mystic flower
That genders its own summer, bloom anew!

And so capricious luck came back to Hugh;
And he was happier than he had been

Since Jamie to that unforgiven sin
Had yielded, ages back upon the Grand.
Now he would turn the cunning of his hand
To carving crutches, that he might arise,
Be manlike, lift more rapidly the skies
That crouched between his purpose and the mark.
The warm glow housed him from the frosty dark,
And there he wrought in very joyous mood
And sang by fits — whereat the solitude
Set laggard singers snatching at the tune.
The gaunter for their hunt, the dogs came soon
To haunt the shaken fringes of the glow,
And, pitching voices to the timeless woe,
Outwaited the lilting. So the Chorus sings
Of terror, pity and the tears of things
When most the doomed protagonist is gay.
The stars swarmed over, and the front of day
Whitened above a white world, and the sun
Rose on a sleeper with a task well done,
Nor roused him till its burning topped the blue.

When Hugh awoke, there woke a younger Hugh,
Now half a stranger; and 'twas good to feel
With ebbing sleep the old green vigor steal,
Thrilling, along his muscles and his veins,
As in a lull of winter-cleansing rains
The gray bough quickens to the sap a-creep.

It chanced the dogs lay near him, sound asleep,
Curled nose to buttock in the noonday glow.
He killed the larger with a well-aimed blow,
Skinned, dressed and set it roasting on a spit;
And when 'twas cooked, ate sparingly of it,
For need might yet make little seem a feast.

Fording the river shallows, south by east
He hobbled now along a withered rill
That issued where old floods had gashed the hill —
A cyclopean portal yawning sheer.
No storm of countless hoof had entered here:
It seemed a place where nothing ever comes
But change of season. He could hear the plums
Plash in the frosted thicket, over-lush;
While, like a spirit lispig in the hush,
The crisp leaves whispered round him as they fell.
And ever now and then the autumn spell
Was broken by an ululating cry
From where far back with muzzle to the sky
The lone dog followed, mourning. Darkness
came;

And huddled up beside a cozy flame,
Hugh's sleep was but a momentary flight
Across a little shadow into light.

So day on day he toiled: and when, afloat
Above the sunset like a stygian boat,

The new moon bore the spectre of the old,
He saw — a dwindling strip of blue outrolled —
The valley of the tortuous Cheyenne.
And ere the half moon sailed the night again,
Those far lone leagues had sloughed their garb of
blue,

And dwindled, dwindled, dwindled after Hugh,
Until he saw that Titan of the plains,
The sinewy Missouri. Dearth of rains
Had made the Giant gaunt as he who saw.
This loud Chain-Smasher of a late March thaw
Seemed never to have bellowed at his banks;
And yet, with staring ribs and hollow flanks,
The urge of an indomitable will
Proclaimed him of the breed of giants still;
And where the current ran a boiling track,
'Twas like the muscles of a mighty back
Grown Atlantean in the wrestler's craft.

Hugh set to work and built a little raft
Of driftwood bound with grapevines. So it fell
That one with an amazing tale to tell
Came drifting to the gates of Kiowa.

IV

THE RETURN OF THE GHOST

Not long Hugh let the lust of vengeance gnaw
Upon him idling; though the tale he told
And what report proclaimed him, were as gold
To buy a winter's comfort at the Post.

"I can not rest; for I am but the ghost
Of someone murdered by a friend," he said,
"So long as yonder traitor thinks me dead,
Aye, buried in the bellies of the crows
And kiotes!"

Whereupon said one of those
Who heard him, noting how the old man shook
As with a chill: "God fend that one should look
With such a blizzard of a face for me!"

For he went grayer like a poplar tree
That shivers, ruffling to the first faint breath
Of storm, while yet the world is still as death
Save where, far off, the kenneled thunders bay.

So brooding, he grew stronger day by day,
Until at last he laid the crutches by.
And then one evening came a rousing cry

From where the year's last keelboat hove in view
Around the bend, its swarthy, sweating crew
Slant to the shouldered line.

Men sang that night
In Kiowa, and by the ruddy light
Of leaping fires amid the wooden walls
The cups went round; and there were merry
brawls
Of bearded lads no older for the beard;
And laughing stories vied with tales of weird
By stream and prairie trail and mountain pass,
Until the tipsy Bourgeois bawled for Glass
To 'shame these with a man's tale fit to hear.'

The graybeard, sitting where the light was blear,
With little heart for revelry, began
His story, told as of another man
Who, loving late, loved much and was betrayed.
He spoke unwitting how his passion played
Upon them, how their eyes grew soft or hard
With what he told; yet something of the bard
He seemed, and his the purpose that is art's,
Whereby men make a vintage of their hearts
And with the wine of beauty deaden pain.
Low-toned, insistent as October rain,
His voice beat on; and now and then would flit
Across the melancholy gray of it

A glimmer of cold fire that, like the flare
Of soundless lightning, showed a world made bare,
Green Summer slain and all its leafage stripped.

And bronze jaws tightened, brawny hands were
gripped,

As though each hearer had a fickle friend.

But when the old man might have made an end,
Rounding the story to a peaceful close

At Kiowa, songlike his voice arose,

The grinning gray mask lifted and the eyes
Burned as a bard's who sees and prophesies,
Conning the future as a time long gone.

Swaying to rhythm the dizzy tale plunged on
Even to the cutting of the traitor's throat,

And ceased — as though a bloody strangling smote
The voice of that gray chanter, drunk with
doom.

And there was shuddering in the blue-smeared
gloom

Of fallen fires. It seemed the deed was done
Before their eyes who heard.

The morrow's sun,
Low over leagues of frost-enchanted plain,
Saw Glass upon his pilgrimage again,
Northbound as hunter for the keelboat's crew.
And many times the wide autumnal blue

Burned out and darkened to a deep of stars;
 And still they toiled among the snags and bars —
 Those lean up-stream men, straining at the rope,
 Lashed by the doubt and strengthened by the
 hope

Of backward winter — engines wrought of bone
 And muscle, panting for the Yellowstone,
 Bend after bend and yet more bends away.
 Now was the river like a sandy bay
 At ebb-tide, and the far-off cutbank's boom
 Mocked them in shallows; now 'twas like a flume
 With which the toilers, barely creeping, strove.
 And bend by bend the selfsame poplar grove,
 Set on the selfsame headland, so it seemed,
 Confronted them, as though they merely dreamed
 Of passing one drear point.

So on and up

Past where the tawny Titan gulps the cup
 Of Cheyenne waters, past the Moreau's mouth;
 And still wry league and stubborn league fell
 south,
 Becoming haze and weary memory.
 Then past the empty lodges of the Ree
 That gaped at cornfields plundered by the Sioux;
 And there old times came mightily on Hugh,
 For much of him was born and buried there.
 Some troubled glory of that wind-tossed hair

Was on the trampled corn; the lonely skies,
So haunted with the blue of Jamie's eyes,
Seemed taunting him; and through the frosted
wood

Along the flat, where once their tent had stood,
A chill wind sorrowed, and the blackbirds' brawl
Amid the funeral torches of the Fall
Ran raucously, a desecrating din.

Past where the Cannon Ball and Heart come in
They labored. Now the Northwest 'woke at last.
The gaunt bluffs bellowed back the trumpet blast
Of charging winds that made the sandbars smoke.
To breathe now was to gulp fine sand, and choke:
The stinging air was sibilant with whips.
Leaning the more and with the firmer grips,
Still northward the embattled toilers pressed
To where the river yaws into the west.
There stood the Mandan village.

Now began

The chaining of the Titan. Drift-ice ran.
The wingéd hounds of Winter ceased to bay.
The stupor of a doom completed lay
Upon the world. The biting darkness fell.
Out in the night, resounding as a well,
They heard the deckplanks popping in a vise
Of frost; all night the smithies of the ice

Reëchoed with the griding jar and clink
Of ghostly hammers welding link to link :
And morning found the world without a sound.
There lay the stubborn Prairie Titan bound,
To wait the far-off Heracleian thaw,
Though still in silent rage he strove to gnaw
The ragged shackles knitting at his breast.

And so the boatman won a winter's rest
Among the Mandan traders: but for Hugh
There yet remained a weary work to do.
Across the naked country west by south
His purpose called him at the Big Horn's mouth —
Three hundred miles of winging for the crow;
But by the river trail that he must go
'Twas seven hundred winding miles at least.

So now he turned his back upon the feast,
Snug ease, the pleasant tale, the merry mood,
And took the bare, foot-sounding solitude
Northwestward. Long they watched him from
the Post,
Skied on a bluff-rim, fading like a ghost
At gray cock-crow; and hooded in his breath,
He seemed indeed a fugitive from Death
On whom some tatter of the shroud still clung.
Blank space engulfed him.

Now the moon was young

When he set forth; and day by day he strode,
His scarce healed wounds upon him like a load;
And dusk by dusk his fire outflared the moon
That waxed until it wrought a spectral noon
At nightfall. Then he came to where, awhirl
With Spring's wild rage, the snow-born Titan girl,
A skyey wonder on her virgin face,
Receives the virile Yellowstone's embrace
And bears the lusty Seeker for the Sea.
A bleak, horizon-wide serenity
Clung round the valley where the twain lay dead.
A winding sheet was on the marriage bed.

'Twas warmer now; the sky grew overcast;
And as Hugh strode southwestward, all the vast
Gray void seemed suddenly astir with wings
And multitudinary whisperings —
The muffled sibilance of tumbling snow.
It seemed no more might living waters flow,
Moon gleam, star glint, dawn smoulder through,
bird sing,
Or ever any fair familiar thing
Be so again. The outworn winds were furled.
Weird weavers of the twilight of a world
Wrought, thread on kissing thread, the web of
doom.
Grown insubstantial in the knitted gloom,

The bluffs loomed eerie, and the scanty trees
Were dwindled to remote dream-traceries
That never might be green or shield a nest.

All day with swinging stride Hugh forged south-
west

Along the Yellowstone's smooth-paven stream,
A dream-shape moving in a troubled dream;
And all day long the whispering weavers wove.
And close on dark he came to where a grove
Of cottonwoods rose tall and shadow-thin
Against the northern bluffs. He camped therein
And with cut boughs made shelter as he might.

Close pressed the blackness of the snow-choked
night

About him, and his fire of plum wood purred.
Athwart a soft penumbral drowse he heard
The tumbling snowflakes sighing all around,
Till sleep transformed it to a Summer sound
Of boyish memory — susurrant bees,
The Southwind in the tousled apple trees
And slumber flowing from their leafy gloom.

He wakened to the cottonwoods' deep boom.
Black fury was the world. The northwest's roar,
As of a surf upon a shipwreck shore,

Plunged high above him from the sheer bluff's
verge;
And, like the backward sucking of the surge,
Far fled the sobbing of the wild snow-spray.

Black blindness grew white blindness — and 'twas
day.

All being now seemed narrowed to a span
That held a sputtering wood fire and a man;
Beyond was tumult and a whirling maze.
The trees were but a roaring in a haze;
The sheer bluff-wall that took the blizzard's
charge

Was thunder flung along the hidden marge
Of chaos, stridden by the ghost of light.
White blindness grew black blindness — and 'twas
night
Wherethrough nor moon nor any star might grope.

Two days since, Hugh had killed an antelope
And what remained sufficed the time of storm.
The snow banked round his shelter kept him warm
And there was wood to burn for many a day.

The third dawn, oozing through a smudge of gray,
Awoke him. It was growing colder fast.
Still from the bluff high over boomed the blast,

But now it took the void with numbing wings.
By noon the woven mystery of things
Frayed raggedly, and through a sudden rift
At length Hugh saw the beetling bluff-wall lift
A sturdy shoulder to the flying rack.
Slowly the sense of distances came back
As with the waning day the great wind fell.
The pale sun set upon a frozen hell.
The wolves howled.

Hugh had left the Mandan town
When, heifer-horned, the maiden moon lies down
Beside the sea of evening. Now she rose
Scar-faced and staring blankly on the snows
While yet the twilight tarried in the west;
And more and more she came a tardy guest
As Hugh pushed onward through the frozen
waste
Until she stole on midnight shadow-faced,
A haggard spectre; then no more appeared.

'Twas on that time the man of hoary beard
Paused in the early twilight, looming lone
Upon a bluff-rim of the Yellowstone,
And peered across the white stream to the south
Where in the flatland at the Big Horn's mouth
The new fort stood that Henry's men had built.

What perfect peace for such a nest of guilt!
What satisfied immunity from woe!
Yon sprawling shadow, pied with candle-glow
And plumed with sparkling wood-smoke, might
have been

A homestead with the children gathered in
To share its bounty through the holidays.
Hugh saw their faces round the gay hearth-blaze:
The hale old father in a mood for yarns
Or boastful of the plenty of his barns,
Fruitage of honest toil and grateful lands;
And, half a stranger to her folded hands,
The mother with October in her hair
And August in her face. One moment there
Hugh saw it. Then the monstrous brutal fact
Wiped out the dream and goaded him to act,
Though now to act seemed strangely like a dream.

Descending from the bluff, he crossed the stream,
The dry snow fiving to his eager stride.
Reaching the fort stockade, he paused to bide
The passing of a whimsy. Was it true?
Or was this but the fretted wraith of Hugh
Whose flesh had fed the kiotes long ago?

Still through a chink he saw the candle-glow,
So like an eye that brazened out a wrong.
And now there came a flight of muffled song,

The rhythmic thudding of a booted heel
 That timed a squeaking fiddle to a reel!
 How swiftly men forget! The spawning Earth
 Is fat with graves; and what is one man worth
 That fiddles should be muted at his fall?
 He should have died and did not — that was
 all.

Well, let the living jig it! He would turn
 Back to the night, the spacious unconcern
 Of wilderness that never played the friend.

Now came the song and fiddling to an end,
 And someone laughed within. The old man
 winced,
 Listened with bated breath, and was convinced
 'Twas Jamie laughing! Once again he heard.
 Joy filled a hush 'twixt heart-beats like a bird;
 Then like a famished cat his lurking hate
 Pounced crushingly.

He found the outer gate,
 Beat on it with his shoulder, raised a cry.
 No doubt 'twas deemed a fitful wind went by;
 None stirred. But when he did not cease to
 shout,

A door creaked open and a man came out
 Amid the spilling candle-glimmer, raised
 The wicket in the outer gate and gazed

One moment on a face as white as death,
Because the beard was thick with frosted breath
Made mystic by the stars. Then came a gasp,
The clatter of the falling wicket's hasp,
The crunch of panic feet along the snow;
And someone stammered huskily and low:
"My God! I saw the Old Man's ghost out
there!"

'Twas spoken as one speaks who feels his hair
Prickle the scalp. And then another said —
It seemed like Henry's voice — "The dead are
dead:

What talk is this, Le Bon? You saw him die!
Who's there?"

Hugh strove to shout, to give the lie
To those within; but could not fetch a sound.
Just so he dreamed of lying under ground
Beside the Grand and hearing overhead
The talk of men. Or was he really dead,
And all this but a maggot in the brain?

Then suddenly the clatter of a chain
Aroused him, and he saw the portal yawn
And saw a bright rectangled patch of dawn
As through a grave's mouth — no, 'twas candle-
light
Poured through the open doorway on the night;

And those were men before him, bulking black
Against the glow.

Reality flashed back;
He strode ahead and entered at the door.
A falling fiddle jangled on the floor
And left a deathly silence. On his bench
The fiddler shrank. A row of eyes, a-blensch
With terror, ran about the naked hall.
And there was one who huddled by the wall
And hid his face and shivered.

For a spell
That silence clung; and then the old man:

"Well,
Is this the sort of welcome that I get?
'Twas not my time to feed the kiotes yet!
Put on the pot and stew a chunk of meat
And you shall see how much a ghost can eat!
I've journeyed far if what I hear be true!"

Now in that none might doubt the voice of
Hugh,

Nor yet the face, however it might seem
A blurred reflection in a flowing stream,
A buzz of wonder broke the trance of dread.
"Good God!" the Major gasped; "We thought
you dead!
Two men have testified they saw you die!"

"If they speak truth," Hugh answered, "then I lie
Both here and by the Grand. If I be right,
Then two lie here and shall lie from this night.
Which are they?"

Henry answered: "Yon is one."

The old man set the trigger of his gun
And gazed on Jules who cowered by the wall.
Eyes blinked, expectant of the hammer's fall;
Ears strained, anticipative of the roar.
But Hugh walked leisurely across the floor
And kicked the croucher, saying: "Come, get up
And wag your tail! I couldn't kill a pup!"
Then turning round: "I had a faithful friend;
No doubt he too was with me to the end!
Where's Jamie?"

"Started out before the snows
For Atkinson."

V

JAMIE

THE Country of the Crows,
Through which the Big Horn and the Rosebud
run,

Sees over mountain peaks the setting sun ;
And southward from the Yellowstone flung wide,
It broadens ever to the morning side
And has the Powder on its vague frontier.
About the subtle changing of the year,
Ere even favored valleys felt the stir
Of Spring, and yet expectancy of her
Was like a pleasant rumor all repeat
Yet none may prove, the sound of horses' feet
Went eastward through the silence of that land.
For then it was there rode a little band
Of trappers out of Henry's Post, to bear
Dispatches down to Atkinson, and there
To furnish out a keelboat for the Horn.
And four went lightly, but the fifth seemed worn
As with a heavy heart ; for that was he
Who should have died but did not.

Silently

He heard the careless parley of his men,
And thought of how the Spring should come
again,

That garish strumpet with her world-old lure,
To waken hope where nothing may endure,
To quicken love where loving is betrayed.

Yet now and then some dream of Jamie made
Slow music in him for a little while;

And they who rode beside him saw a smile
Glimmer upon that ruined face of gray,
As on a winter fog the groping day
Pours glory through a momentary rift.

Yet never did the gloom that bound him, lift;
He seemed as one who feeds upon his heart
And finds, despite the bitter and the smart,
A little sweetness and is glad for that.

Now up the Powder, striking for the Platte
Across the bleak divide the horsemen went;
Attained that river where its course is bent
From north to east: and spurring on apace
Along the wintry valley, reached the place
Where from the west flows in the Laramie.
Thence, fearing to encounter with the Ree,
They headed eastward through the barren land
To where, fleet-footed down a track of sand,

The Niobrara races for the morn —
A gaunt-loined runner.

Here at length was born
Upon the southern slopes the baby Spring,
A timid, fretful, ill-begotten thing,
A-suckle at the Winter's withered paps :
Not such as when announced by thunder-claps
And ringed with swords of lightning, she would
ride,
The haughty victrix and the mystic bride,
Clad splendidly as never Sheba's Queen,
Before her marching multitudes of green
In many-bannered triumph ! Grudging, slow,
Amid the fraying fringes of the snow
The bunch-grass sprouted ; and the air was
chill.

Along the northern slopes 'twas winter still,
And no root dreamed what Triumph-over-Death
Was nurtured now in some bleak Nazareth
Beyond the crest to sunward.

On they spurred
Through vacancies that waited for the bird,
And everywhere the Odic Presence dwelt.
The Southwest blew, the snow began to melt ;
And when they reached the valley of the Snake,
The Niobrara's ice began to break,

And all night long and all day long it made
A sound as of a random cannonade
With rifles snarling down a skirmish line.

The geese went over. Every tree and vine
Was dotted thick with leaf-buds when they saw
The little river of Keyapaha
Grown mighty for the moment. Then they came,
One evening when all thickets were aflame
With pale green witch-fires and the windflowers
blew,

To where the headlong Niobrara threw
His speed against the swoln Missouri's flank
And hurled him roaring to the further bank —
A giant staggered by a pigmy's sling.
Thence, plunging ever deeper into Spring,
Across the greening prairie east by south
They rode, and, just above the Platte's wide
mouth,
Came, weary with the trail, to Atkinson.

There all the vernal wonder-work was done:
No care-free heart might find aught lacking there.
The dove's call wandered in the drowsy air;
A love-dream brooded in the lucent haze.
Priapic revellers, the shrieking jays
Held mystic worship in the secret shade.
Woodpeckers briskly plied their noisy trade

Along the tree-boles, and their scarlet hoods
Flashed flame-like in the smoky cottonwoods.
What lacked? Not sweetness in the sun-lulled
breeze;

The plum bloom murmurous with bumblebees
Was drifted deep in every draw and slough.
Not color; witcheries of gold and blue
The dandelion and the violet
Wove in the green. Might not the sad forget,
The happy here have nothing more to seek?
Lo, yonder by that pleasant little creek,
How one might loll upon the grass and fish
And build the temple of one's wildest wish
'Twixt nibbles! Surely there was quite enough
Of wizard-timber and of wonder-stuff
To rear it nobly to the blue-domed roof!

Yet there was one whose spirit stood aloof
From all this joyousness — a gray old man,
No nearer now than when the quest began
To what he sought on that long winter trail.

Aye, Jamie had been there; but when the tale
That roving trappers brought from Kiowa
Was told to him, he seemed as one who saw
A ghost, and could but stare on it, they said:
Until one day he mounted horse and fled

Into the North, a devil-ridden man.
"I've got to go and find him if I can,"
Was all he said for days before he left.

And what of Hugh? So long of love bereft,
So long sustained and driven by his hate,
A touch of ruth now made him desolate.
No longer eager to avenge the wrong,
With not enough of pity to be strong
And just enough of love to choke and sting,
A gray old hulk amid the surge of Spring
He floundered on a lee-shore of the heart.

But when the boat was ready for the start
Up the long watery stairway to the Horn,
Hugh joined the party. And the year was shorn
Of blooming girlhood as they forged amain
Into the North; the late green-mantled plain
Grew fallow; and the ruthless golden shower
Of Summer wrought in lust upon the flower
That withered in the endless martyrdom
To seed. The scarlet quickened on the plum
About the Heart's mouth when they came thereto;
Among the Mandans grapes were turning blue,
And they were purple at the Yellowstone.
A frosted scrub-oak, standing out alone
Upon a barren bluff top, gazing far
Above the crossing at the Powder's bar,

Was spattered with the blood of Summer slain.
So it was Autumn in the world again,
And all those months of toil had yielded nought
To Hugh. (How often is the seeker sought
By what he seeks — a blind, heart-breaking
game!)

For always had the answer been the same
From roving trapper and at trading post :
Aye, one who seemed to stare upon a ghost
And followed willy-nilly where it led,
Had gone that way in search of Hugh, they said —
A haggard, blue-eyed, yellow-headed chap.

And often had the old man thought, 'Mayhap
He'll be at Henry's Post and we shall meet ;
And to forgive and to forget were sweet :
'Tis for its nurse that Vengeance whets the tooth !
And oh the golden time of Jamie's youth,
That it should darken for a graybeard's whim !'
So Hugh had brooded, till there came on him
The pity of a slow rain after drouth.

But at the crossing of the Rosebud's mouth
A shadow fell upon his growing dream.
A band of Henry's traders, bound down stream,
Who paused to traffic in the latest word —
Down-river news for matters seen and heard

In higher waters — had not met the lad,
Not yet encountered anyone who had.

Alas, the journey back to yesterwhiles!
How tangled are the trails! The stubborn miles,
How wearily they stretch! And if one win
The long way back in search of what has been,
Shall he find aught that is not strange and new?

Thus wrought the melancholy news in Hugh,
As he turned back with those who brought the
news;

For more and more he dreaded now to lose
What doubtful seeking rendered doubly dear.
And in the time when keen winds stripped the
year

He came with those to where the Poplar joins
The greater river. There Assinoboines,
Rich from the Summer's hunting, had come down
And flung along the flat their ragged town,
That traders might bring goods and winter there.

So leave the heartsick graybeard. Otherwhere
The final curtain rises on the play.
'Tis dead of Winter now. For day on day
The blizzard wind has thundered, sweeping wide
From Mississippi to the Great Divide

Out of the North beyond Saskatchewan.
Brief evening glimmers like an inverse dawn
After a long white night. The tempest dies;
The snow-haze lifts. Now let the curtain rise
Upon Milk River valley, and reveal
The stars like broken glass on frosted steel
Above the Piegan lodges, huddled deep
In snowdrifts, like a freezing flock of sheep.
A crystal weight the dread cold crushes down
And no one moves about the little town
That seems to grovel as a thing that fears.

But see! a lodge-flap swings; a squaw appears,
Hunched with the sudden cold. Her footsteps
 creak

Shrill in the hush. She stares upon the bleak,
White skyline for a moment, then goes in.
We follow her, push back the flap of skin,
Enter the lodge, inhale the smoke-tanged air
And blink upon the little faggot-flare
That blossoms in the center of the room.
Unsteady shadows haunt the outer gloom
Wherein the walls are guessed at. Upward,
 far,

The smoke-vent now and then reveals a star
As in a well. The ancient squaw, a-stoop,
Her face light-stricken, stirs a pot of soup

That simmers with a pleasant smell and sound.
A gnarled old man, cross-legged upon the ground,
Sits brooding near. He feeds the flame with
sticks;

It brightens. Lo, a leaden crucifix
Upon the wall! These heathen eyes, though dim,
Have seen the white man's God and cling to Him,
Lest on the sunset trail slow feet should err.

But look again. From yonder bed of fur
Beside the wall a white man strives to rise.
He lifts his head, with yearning sightless eyes
Gropes for the light. A mass of golden hair
Falls round the face that sickness and despair
Somehow make old, albeit he is young.
His weak voice, stumbling to the mongrel tongue
Of traders, flings a question to the squaw:
"You saw no Black Robe? Tell me what you
saw!"

And she, brief-spoken as her race, replies:
"Heaped snow — sharp stars — a kiote on the
rise."

The blind youth huddles moaning in the furs.
The firewood spits and pops, the boiled pot purrs
And sputters. On this little isle of sound
The sea of winter silence presses round —
One feels it like a menace.

Now the crone
Dips out a cup of soup, and having blown
Upon it, takes it to the sick man there
And bids him eat. With wild, unseeing stare
He turns upon her: "Why are they so long?
I can not eat! I've done a mighty wrong;
It chokes me! Oh no, no, I must not die
Until the Black Robe comes!" His feeble cry
Sinks to a whisper. "Tell me, did they go —
Your kinsmen?"

"They went south before the snow."
"And will they tell the Black Robe?"

"They will tell."

The crackling of the faggots for a spell
Seems very loud. Again the sick man moans
And, struggling with the weakness in his bones,
Would gain his feet, but can not. "Go again,
And tell me that you see the bulks of men
Dim in the distance there."

The squaw obeys;
Returns anon to crouch beside the blaze,
Numb-fingered and a-shudder from the night.
The vacant eyes that hunger for the light
Are turned upon her: "Tell me what you saw!
Or maybe snowshoes sounded up the draw.
Quick, tell me what you saw and heard out there!"

“Heaped snow — sharp stars — big stillness everywhere.”

One clutching at thin ice with numbing grip
Cries while he hopes; but when his fingers slip,
He takes the final plunge without a sound.
So sinks the youth now, hopeless. All around
The winter silence presses in; the walls
Grow vague and vanish in the gloom that crawls
Close to the failing fire.

The Piegans sleep.

Night hovers midway down the morning steep.
The sick man drowns. Nervously he starts
And listens; hears no sound except his heart's
And that weird murmur brooding stillness makes.
But stealthily upon the quiet breaks —
Vague as the coursing of the hearer's blood —
A muffled, rhythmic beating, thud on thud,
That, growing nearer, deepens to a crunch.
So, hungry for the distance, snowshoes munch
The crusted leagues of Winter, stride by stride.
A camp-dog barks; the hollow world outside
Brim with the running howl of many curs.

Now wide-awake, half risen in the furs,
The youth can hear low voices and the creak
Of snowshoes near the lodge. His thin, wild
shriek

Startles the old folk from their slumberings :

“He comes! The Black Robe!”

Now the door-flap swings,
And briefly one who splutters Piegan, bars
The way, then enters. Now the patch of stars
Is darkened with a greater bulk that bends
Beneath the lintel. “Peace be with you, friends!
And peace with him herein who suffers pain!”
So speaks the second comer of the twain —
A white man by his voice. And he who lies
Beside the wall, with empty, groping eyes
Turned to the speaker: “There can be no peace
For me, good Father, till this gnawing cease —
The gnawing of a great wrong I have done.”

The big man leans above the youth: “My son —”
(Grown husky with the word, the deep voice
breaks,

And for a little spell the whole man shakes
As with the clinging cold) “— have faith and
hope!

’Tis often nearest dawn when most we grope.
Does not the Good Book say, Who seek shall
find?”

“But, Father, I am broken now and blind,
And I have sought, and I have lost the way.”
To which the stranger: “What would Jesus say?

Hark ! In the silence of the heart 'tis said —
By their own weakness are the feeble sped ;
The humblest feet are surest for the goal ;
The blind shall see the City of the Soul.
Lay down your burden at His feet to-night."

Now while the fire, replenished, bathes in light
The young face scrawled with suffering and care,
Flinging ironic glories on the hair
And glinting on dull eyes that once flashed blue,
The sick one tells the story of old Hugh
To him whose face, averted from the glow,
Still lurks in gloom. The winds of battle blow
Once more along the steep. Again one sees
The rescue from the fury of the Rees,
The graybeard's fondness for the gay lad ; then
The westward march with Major Henry's men
With all that happened there upon the Grand.

"And so we hit the trail of Henry's band,"
The youth continues ; "for we feared to die :
And dread of shame was ready with the lie
We carried to our comrades. Hugh was dead
And buried there beside the Grand, we said.
Could any doubt that what we said was true ?
They even praised our courage ! But I knew !
The nights were hell because I heard his cries
And saw the crows a-pecking at his eyes,

The kiotes tearing at him. O my God!
I tried and tried to think him under sod;
But every time I slept it was the same.
And then one night — I lay awake — he came!
I say he came — I know I hadn't slept!
Amid a light like rainy dawn, he crept
Out of the dark upon his hands and knees.
The wound he got that day among the Rees
Was like red fire. A snarl of bloody hair
Hung round the eyes that had a pleading stare,
And down the ruined face and gory beard
Big tear-drops rolled. He went as he appeared,
Trailing a fog of light that died away.
And I grew old before I saw the day.
O Father, I had paid too much for breath!
The Devil traffics in the fear of death,
And may God pity anyone who buys
What I have bought with treachery and lies —
This rat-like gnawing in my breast!

“I knew

I couldn't rest until I buried Hugh;
And so I told the Major I would go
To Atkinson with letters, ere the snow
Had choked the trails. Jules wouldn't come
along;
He didn't seem to realize the wrong;

He called me foolish, couldn't understand.
I rode alone — not south, but to the Grand.
Daylong my horse beat thunder from the sod,
Accusing me; and all my prayers to God
Seemed flung in vain at bolted gates of brass.
And in the night the wind among the grass
Hissed endlessly the story of my shame.

“I do not know how long I rode: I came
Upon the Grand at last, and found the place,
And it was empty. Not a sign or trace
Was left to show what end had come to Hugh.
And oh that grave! It gaped upon the blue,
A death-wound pleading dumbly for the slain.
I filled it up and fled across the plain,
And somehow came to Atkinson at last.
And there I heard the living Hugh had passed
Along the river northward in the Fall!
O Father, he had found the strength to crawl
That long, heart-breaking distance back to life,
Though Jules had taken blanket, steel and knife,
And I, his trusted comrade, had his gun!

“They said I'd better stay at Atkinson,
Because old Hugh was surely hunting me,
White-hot to kill. I did not want to flee
Or hide from him. I even wished to die,
If so this aching cancer of a lie

Might be torn out forever. So I went,
As eager as the homesick homeward bent,
In search of him and peace.

But I was cursed.

For even when his stolen rifle burst
And spewed upon me this eternal night,
I might not die as any other might;
But God so willed that friendly Piegans came
To spare me yet a little unto shame.
O Father, is there any hope for me?"

"Great hope indeed, my son!" so huskily
The other answers. "I recall a case
Like yours — no matter what the time and
place —

'Twas somewhat like the story that you tell;
Each seeking and each sought, and both in hell;
But in the tale I mind, they met at last."

The youth sits up, white-faced and breathing
fast:

"They met, you say? What happened? Quick!
Oh quick!"

"The old man found the dear lad blind and sick
And both forgave — 'twas easy to forgive —
For oh we have so short a time to live —"

Whereat the youth: "Who's here? The Black
Robe's gone!
Whose voice is this?"

The gray of winter dawn
Now creeping round the door-flap, lights the
place
And shows thin fingers groping for a face
Deep-scarred and hoary with the frost of years
Whereover runs a new springtide of tears.

"O Jamie, Jamie, Jamie — I am Hugh!
There was no Black Robe yonder — Will I do?"

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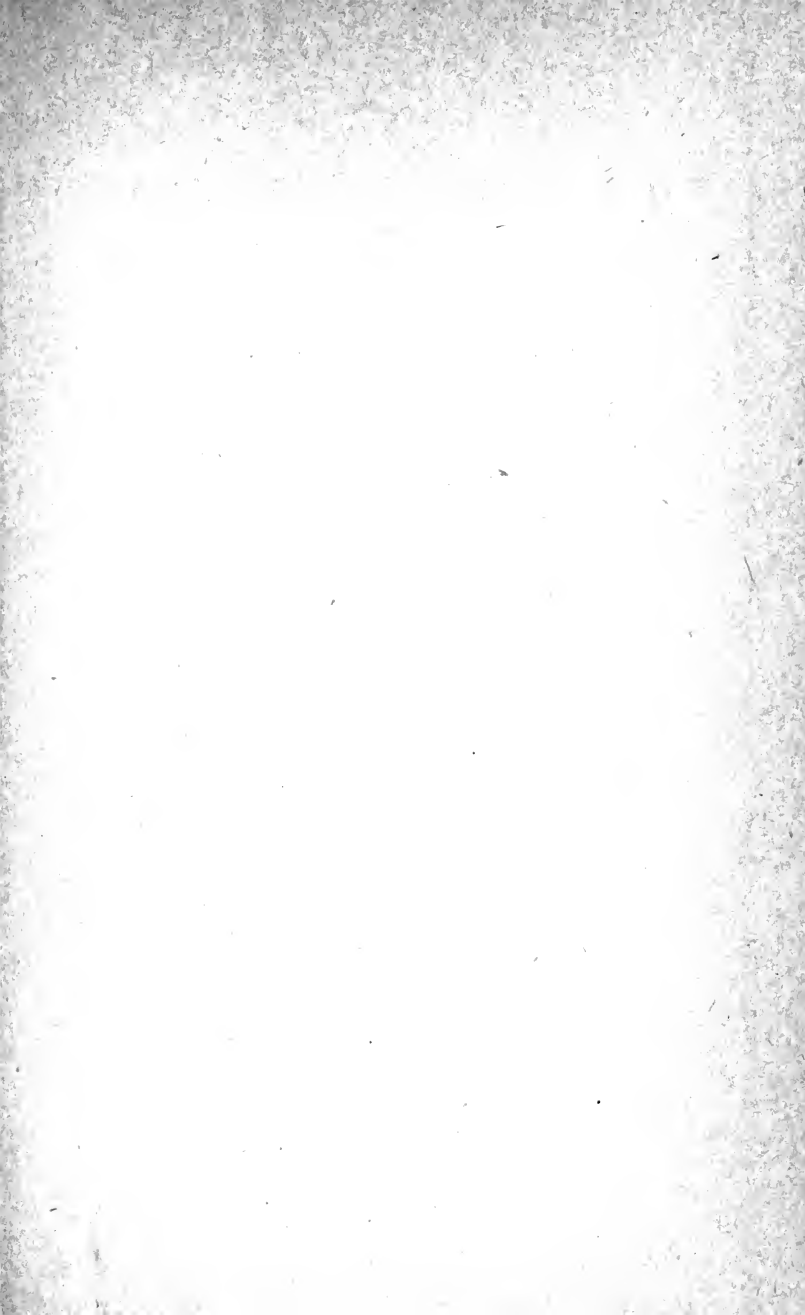
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